



**MIDLANDS STATE UNIVERSITY**

**FACULTY OF ARTS  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMMUNICATION**

**DISSERTATION TOPIC**

**SELVES IN THE MAKING: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF BARACK  
OBAMA'S ASCENDANCY TO POWER**

**By**

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**A dissertation submitted to the Department of English and  
Communication, Midlands State University in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the Master of Arts in African and Diasporan Literature  
in English Degree.**

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**Supervisor's Signature.....Date.....**

## DEDICATION

### In this world

This research is dedicated to my wife Elisia, my daughter Tracy and son Dereck Simbarashe who all understood why I could not be there for them during the time it took to write this dissertation.

### In the other world

The research is dedicated to my father who though late, remains a remote source of inspiration in all my endeavours.

## DECLARATION

I hereby certify that this research submitted to meet the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in African and Diasporan Literature in English at the Midlands State University is my own work and that it has not been submitted previously at any other university or faculty.

TIMOTHY MHITI

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## ABSTRACT

The research was designed to explore how Barack Obama constructs his self identities which enable him to get to power. This construction is reflected in his self life-writings including *Dreams from My Father: A story of Race and Inheritance*, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* and *Change We Can Believe In: Barack Obama's Plan to Renew America's Promise*. Postcolonial theories on identity construction were used for the reason that they reflect the multiple nature of individual identities. Theories of narratology were also used in a bid to highlight the politics that inheres in self life-writing. The dissertation's thrust therefore was on how Obama deploys narrative that suits his purpose-being the President of the United States of America. It was therefore concluded that autobiography, through narrative, can play a critical role in constructing individual identities.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

### 1.0. Background To Study

When blacks were enslaved in Africa, they were forcibly uprooted from their places of origin and transplanted in exotic locales in the Americas. During slavery, they went through harrowing experiences. What they lost through slavery was incalculable and beyond measure. They lost their freedom, language and dignity all of which are basic tools of self definition. Slave trade also in very fundamental ways impacted on the African collective as well as the individual especially in terms of their identities which were radically reconfigured. Their identity compasses were gravely tampered with and the blacks came to the realisation that they were victims of white racism, a fact which made Du Bois (1903) to famously proclaim that the problem of the twentieth century was that of the colour line.

The blacks in America found themselves hemmed in and marooned in an unbelievably complex world and as a response to this situation, they ended up turning into themselves to articulate their experiences. In fact, so complex and staggering was the state of affairs prevailing in America that many a black American found it historically imperative to articulate their experiences within this confounding racial matrix. Consequently, blues, jazz and poetry were used as some of the mediums through which black people's experiences were articulated. A more potent form of expression however was the autobiography, the life story, which succinctly captured the individual's experiencing of the American situation. It comes as no surprise therefore that in the bulk of African American literature there is a pre-occupation with the problem of the "self" and its perception. In fact, the self as a category is recurrent in African American literature with writers constantly searching for that seemingly

elusive fulfilling sense of self identity. They have exploited the autobiography a great deal in narrating their experiences.

The history and provenance of African American autobiography is linked inextricably to the rise of the genre of slave narratives. The autobiographies tended to be testimonial in nature and were mediums through which blacks expressed themselves and registered their disenchantment with the existing state of affairs. The slave narratives were evidence or proof of the brutality and inhumanity of slavery as an institution. They therefore belonged to the abolitionist movement. Autobiographies such as those of Olaudah Equiano (1789), Frederic Douglas (1845) and Booker T Washington (1901) all belong to the slave narrative tradition and in all of them questions of freedom and identity are central.

A more prodigious amount of autobiographical writing was produced by African Americans in the twentieth century including those of Johnson [1912], Wright (1945), Baldwin (1953), Cleaver (1954), Malcolm X (1965) and Haley (1976) whose text however traces the provenance of slavery, his history and his ancestry. Pertinent to observe in all these autobiographies is that the writers are engaged in serious endeavours to solidly locate themselves, establish roots and have a clearly-defined sense of self identity within this staggering American racial matrix. It has to be emphasised, though, that it is an identity that is linked to group or collective fate. In other words, the self life narratives are essentially a collective description of race memory of African Americans. They are all, in one way or the other, mired in the American racial conundrum and hence are permeated with a racial vision within the perspectives of the American experience as a whole.

One of the most defining characteristics of African American autobiography, therefore, is its presentation of the most private or personal accounts of the meaning and connotations of belonging to a certain race. Invariably, there is a recounting of identity struggles within the

American society and this is the thread, by no means tenuous, which connects all the autobiographies authored by black Americans.

Interestingly, late in the twentieth century as well as early in the twenty first century, we have Obama coming in with his own autobiographical writings, which, it is crucial to observe, just follow the general trajectory of the African American autobiographical writing tradition. What makes Obama unique, though, from the other black American writers is that he is born at a time when efforts to achieve racial harmony through the civil rights movements are fully fledged. The mere existence of a black-white union, of which he is a product, speaks volumes of the enormous strides that have been taken in America to try and rectify the American racial problems. It is even more interesting to note that his father is the black of the partners as he is an African who hails from Kenya. So, there is something novel about the relationship of his parents as it is something hitherto unheard of in America due to the problems associated with the colour line.

However, in terms of his experiencing of the American situation, he is not different from the other African Americans. Therefore, the desire and need to forge a coherent self identity (Giddens, 1991) becomes, for him, imperative.

Obama is coming in with a more pronounced subjective touch to identity and is acutely aware of its fluid nature. If the subjective nature of identity had not been thoroughly and robustly explored by his predecessors, if it had been looked at summary-fashion, Obama, the scholar and intellectual that he is, comprehensively brings in this subjective element in his autobiographies. Though also linked to his black race, Obama seeks a more local and individual articulation of self identity which is precisely why he posits that “My identity might begin with the fact of my race, but it didn’t, couldn’t end there” (Dreams From My Father, 1995:111). Implied in this bold statement is the fact that individuals are at liberty to

authorize their self identities. Obama thus, unlike his predecessors, wants to entrench himself in America and assume political relevance.

It is within this ambit that this study seeks to explore and analyse the construction of Obama's self identities. The identities are forged within the context of late modernity which, according to Smith and Watson (2001) and Hall (1992), confers individuals with a multiplicity of identities and hence the title "Selves in the Making".

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

For all its attempts at truth-telling and forging and authorizing a definitive sense of self identity, the autobiography as a vehicle through which a coherent self identity can be articulated, is to an extent limited. This is precisely for the reason that individuals do not have single and composite but multiple identities. Apart from that, autobiography is always mired in the politics of narration because the autobiographer endeavours at all costs to narrate in such a way that certain desirable images of the self are projected. Thus, much as Obama's life narratives including *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995), *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (2006) and *Change We Can Believe In: Barack Obama's Plan to Renew America's Promise* (2008) try to trace Obama's ascendancy to power, they are all as reflective of the multiple nature of his identities as they are implicated in the politics of narration.

### **1.2 Significance of the Study**

Identity politics on the African American literary scene have occupied centre stage since time immemorial with creative writers, critical thinkers and autobiographers all focusing on the polarized nature of the American society in terms of the black versus white relations. They have all variously tried to depict the Manichean nature of the American society.

Such a position is what this study seeks to slightly depart from by casting that Obama's texts are more than mere articulations of racial relations in America. In fact, Obama goes one step better by articulating the subjective nature of identity. In this vein, this study is considered significant in the respect that an analysis of self identity from a subjective perspective has not received adequate attention. It is therefore important to explore this territory in the academic realm. Thus, the study is instrumental in exploring and illuminating on the subjective and provisional nature of identity in the late modern age as well as demonstrating that identities are constructed in the modern epoch. They are not discovered. By underscoring the complex nature of identity, the present study is significant in that it equips the academia with knowledge on identity that will enable them to guard against analysing it in essential terms.

Secondly, the study is important in that it proves that what is autobiographical does not necessarily have to be regimented. In this respect, it is crucial to observe that Obama's texts especially *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (2006) and *Change We Can Believe In* (2008) transcend the narrow and restrictive definition of autobiography as a retrospective rendition of the author's life. In fact, both texts are not doctrinaire or orthodox autobiographies in that they are a complex fusion of autobiography and policy and hence are freshly personal and refreshing. They are something of an innovation in the writing of autobiography and hence demonstrate that what is autobiographical should have porous borders to accommodate any form of writing which seeks to propel, promote and brand the self by the self. After all, the self is its own diplomat and therefore it seeks to spruce up and scaffold its image by any means available to it.

The study is also central in that individual narratives are critical in that subjective experiences of individuals can be related to structures and institutions such as nations which are by and large socio-political. In this regard, how Obama carves those identities that propel him into political prominence against seemingly insurmountable odds is proof of that. Through tracing

the trajectory of his life, one is enabled to see his meteoric rise and ascendancy until he gets to where he is today-at the helm of one of the most powerful nations in the world-America where hitherto, it was unheard of for black men to be in power at whatever level.

Lastly the study is considered to be important in that it enables the academic fraternity to probe how subjective aspects of identity formation encountered in personal narratives of the self can help in the understanding of social and political change. Through self-narratives, we understand how individuals create meaning in their lives, make choices and hold beliefs that inform their choices as well as how they shape relationships.

While acknowledging that there is nothing remarkably novel about this present study, the hope is that it will, in one way or the other, give further impetus to the on-going studies on identity in the late modern age.

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

The research will attempt to:

- (a) explain the concept of the self
- (b) examine the constructedness of identity in Obama's texts
- (c) explore the politics of self writing/the scaffolding acts in autobiography
- (d) evaluate the significance of autobiography in identity construction

### **1.4 Key Research Questions**

- (a) How does Obama construct his identities in his texts which are largely narratives of race and class?
- (b) How does Obama depict his selves in his texts and in the process narrate strategies for political change?

(c) What particular identity postures does Obama assume and project in his texts?

## **1.5 Literature Review on Autobiography and Self and Identity**

The research now focuses on a review of literature that will help situate and contextualise the principle area of the study. Given that the research is on Obama's identity construction from an autobiographical perspective, it is only prudent that the researcher reviews literature on autobiography in general before looking at the specificities of self identity. It is critical that literature on autobiography be reviewed for the simple reason that its provenance is inextricably linked with the conception of the self as an autonomous entity. Thereafter, the dissertation will try and get under the skin of and take an in-depth analysis of literature on self and identity. Identity's trajectory with its mazy contours and complexities is going to be traced before the establishing of the position that will be taken in this study.

### **1.5.1 The Provenance of Autobiography**

By definition, autobiography is, according to Berryman {1999:72}, "the many different accounts that authors make of their experiences." Placing a lot of emphasis on "many different accounts", this definition is instrumental for purposes of this study because it allows for various forms of writing to be incorporated into the autobiographical canon. Therefore, it is going to be possible for the researcher in this dissertation to classify Obama's *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (2006) and *Change We Can Believe In* (2008) under the autobiographical genre. Olney (1972) lends weight to this working definition by contending that an autobiography is a product of man's unique creative impulse, and as such, the form it takes at any given time is unpredictable. What this means is that any writing that reflects the life of its writer in whatever form it comes is autobiographical. It also has to be understood that autobiography is a Greek word, a combination of three words with auto meaning self, bios meaning life and graphe meaning writing. In brief therefore,

autobiography can be defined as self life-writing, a definition which is observed and followed religiously by Smith and Watson (2001).

In terms of its provenance, autobiography can be traced to modernity. As Giddens (1991) observes, by modernity, it does not necessarily mean societies today but societies in which modernity is developed. Modernity can in fact be traced to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries during the industrial revolution with its attendant technological advancement, which fundamentally altered the individuals' experiencing of time and space. This transformation of experiential reality placed enormous challenges on humanity as it entailed massive and untold uncertainties for individuals. Consequently, there was a reconfiguration in terms of social relations between the individual and society, more so, with the realization of more differences than similarities between individuals. As such, individuals had to search for answers and eloquently so, to confront the massive challenges that came their way. Self life-writing thus emerged as one robust way of responding to the prevailing state of affairs as individuals felt obliged to turn into themselves to narrate their experiences and in the process construct their identities and define themselves.

The point here is, prior to modernity that is when societies were still strictly traditional, it was not important for the self to be storied. As Giddens (1991), Weintraub (1978) and Gusdorf (2001) concur, there was no such room since collective destiny was valorized. With the advent of modernity and its attendant challenges, individuals took recourse to, in Gusdorf's (2001) words, fix their own images. Put in another way, they felt it imperative to write themselves into existence, to announce their presence and in the process guard against disappearance. This observation has led Bruner (2001) to conclude that an autobiography is an act of entrenchment.



The Greek philosopher Heraclitus is even more definitive and succinct in capturing the origins of autobiography. His famous declaration as quoted by Olney (1972:4) that “every cosmology begins in self knowledge” is central to our understanding of the development of self life-writing. As Javangwe (2011) explains, the import of Heraclitus’ declaration is that the self is the focal point from which the world is to be apprehended. He further explains that the autobiographical narrative process is an act of constructing the narrator’s own cosmos in which everything else is ordered and re-ordered to meet the narrator’s needs. So, Heraclitus’ declaration is quite significant in pointing to the provenance of autobiography.

### **1.5.2 The Politics of Self Life-Writing**

Autobiography, it has to be underscored, has its own inherent political arithmetic especially given that it is an exercise in which the narrator orders and re-orders the cosmos according to his needs. Precisely for this reason, it has since its coming into being been mired in academic controversy. As Anderson (1991:204) correctly observes, autobiographies are written “uptime” and rely on the past to paint and explain the present through a process of selective remembering. That notion alone that an autobiography is a retrospective rendition of a life lived essentially means that it is a representation which naturally is at one remove from the actual life lived. Autobiography is even more complicated by its reliance on memory which is famed for its fickleness and flawed nature. This brings in a political dimension to autobiography. The mere act of selectively remembering is deeply political. To say otherwise might be convenient but it will certainly be short-sighted and naïve.

Another political dimension to autobiography emanates from the fact that it is not and can never be produced in a vacuum. Rather, as Gusdorf (2001:29) notes, autobiography thrives in a culturally specific society. This means that the cultural imperative and dictates of that society will significantly fashion and colour how autobiographies are produced.

Closely linked to this cultural thrust are other variables including mediations of tradition, language and historical imperative all of which in one way or the other render the whole process of self life-writing political. There is no neutrality of poise, therefore as one narrates a life. It is always from a certain standpoint as there are inevitably ideological stirrings and motivations that titillate and drive the desire to represent the self. As observed earlier in this chapter, narrative therefore is a vital cog in the autobiographical canon- vital in the sense of illuminating on the political nature of autobiography. It will for this reason therefore, be folly or short-sightedness to take the narrator for his every word.

### **1.5.3 Self and Identity**

In a bid to broaden the scope of the study, literature on identity and the self need to be reviewed. This will go a long way towards elucidating issues central to the research's thrust. First and foremost, an acknowledgement has to be made of the fact that identity as a concept has never failed to elicit critical attention. In fact, scholarly debates about identity and the state of the self are age-old and mired in deep controversy. In the following sections, the researcher will attempt to give an overview of past and recent debates on self and identity but ultimately insisting that there is a range of identity schemes. The researcher will review scholarly renditions of the modes of identities prevailing in medieval times, in the modern epoch and more importantly, in late modernity.

### **1.5.4 Conceptions of Self and Identity in Medieval Times**

Many scholars have it that the defining characteristics of the self in pre and medieval times are constancy and fixity .This is precisely because of the conditions that prevailed during those times. Taking pre-medieval Europe as a case in point, Giddens (1991) forwards the argument that the society had no room for individual identity, a point which is given further impetus by Weintraub (1978:14) when he contends that man was prevented from "self

definition as a separate individual by the realities of a tightly knit kinship society.” Gusdorf (2001) also emphasises the close- knit nature of those traditional societies .What all these observations by critics amount to , to put it more crudely, is that there was no self to talk about in traditional societies as individuals were immersed in social groups. So, much as we would think of fixity and constancy as hallmarks of traditional selves, in reality it is more an expression of the fixed nature of group identities than individual identities perse.Lentz (1995:306) posits thatthose traditional identities were hugely essentialist as they emphasised the significance of primordial ties and hence the existence of an priori givenness, and a given common history, culture and language. Of importance in this observation is that traditional societies just valorized collective destiny. The individual was given neither breathing space nor room to manoeuvre in a bid to assume an individuated identity posture. If anything, even in cases of individuals accomplishing great feats, they were simply projected as typical or representative of their groups. They had to play second fiddle to their various collectives.

Such a scenario inevitably robs individuals of agency and hence for purposes of this study such identity indices will not be explored. This is because such identity delineations fail to acknowledge the subjectivity of individuals within any given collective when in reality subjectivity is innate in human beings, it is born in them. Such a position therefore almost invariably fails to answer such crucial questions as those to do with where individual subjectivity comes from, that thought which deviates from the norm. These are very critical questions and they are answered, albeit faintly, by enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke and Descartes, an argument which is going to be explored in the next section.

#### **1.5.5 Conceptions of the Self and Identity in Modernity**

Modernity which can be traced to the industrial revolution and enlightenment period as explained earlier in this chapter witnessed the birth of a slightly different self from the one

existing during the medieval times. Similarity is seen in that the self still has a constant and fixed identity. This is John Locke's (1690) perception of individuals whom he sees as invariably static in terms of their identity. However, this self now unlike previously relies on reason and intellect, values put forward during the enlightenment period. Consciousness is the defining marker of the self during this period, a characteristic that has led to the rise of the concept of the sovereign individual (Woodward, 2002). Put in another way, the self is no longer a blank sheet upon which the social world inscribes its meaning because a great value is attached to the mind. The self is no longer just empty, a *tabula rasa* so to speak.

Descartes (cited in Woodward, 2002) also concurs with this view of a sovereign individual, further acknowledging the variation in terms of knowledge from individual to individual. The self which is the conscious rational individual subject then becomes the starting point for identity articulation.

However, for all this seemingly radical departure from the pre and medieval conceptions of the self, these enlightenment thinkers are also paying insufficient, if any attention to the fluid nature of the identity of the self. For instance, Locke's injunction that "it is consciousness , that unites all the different actions an individual has performed and makes a personal self who is the same person today as forty years ago-as yesterday."(Cooley, 1964:213) is arguably the height of limitedness in terms of perceiving identities. This is precisely for the reason that the self is being depicted as a compact and unified unit as it negotiates its way in spatial and temporal frameworks. It is, in fact, an essence marked out by that never-changing state.

Such a posture once again is not very useful for purposes of the present study which basically forwards the argument that identities are dynamic, elastic and subject to change, not only depending on individuals' whims but also the vagaries of time and circumstances. It is also a mark of short-sightedness to surmise that the self does not have to look outside itself to

formulate an identity as it solely relies on its unchanging core, its consciousness. The truth of the matter is that identities are always in a state of flux and are constructed inside social situations. This fluid and sociological perspective of identities is a product of late modernity and it will be explored in the next section.

#### **1.5.6 Conceptions of the Self and Identity in Late Modernity.**

Late modernity simply refers to modernity that has developed to an advanced stage. Late modernity has got its distinct characteristics which are going to be explored later in this section. What is fascinating about late modernity in terms of identities is the seeming divergence in scholarly opinion. On one hand, there are those who forward the sociological thrust in a more pronounced way and yet others emphasise self reflexivity as the hallmark of identity construction in modernity. The research will attempt to analyse scholarly opinion on both perspectives.

First and foremost, the self in late modernity is a radical departure from the self existing hitherto, who was defined and perceived in sovereign terms. This is so because the self cannot effectively delink from society. Also, unlike in earlier times where fixity was a hallmark of individual identities, the identities of the self in late modernity are always in a state of flux, thus pointing to a fundamental shift.

In spite of how divergent their opinions might be, a good many scholars are in agreement as to the sociological aspect and fluid nature of the identities of individuals. Howarth (2002:256) for instance, contends that while it is always in a state of flux, identity can never fully disengage itself from any structure that holds it in place. Individuals always find themselves hemmed in in social contexts, a situation which has led Howarth (2002:256) to pronounce that individuals always find themselves in the “grip of identity”. This grip is a result of social

structures which in one way or the other demand conformity or that the game is played according to their rules.

Other scholars such as Cooley (1964:168) are of the considered opinion that the self is formed in the context of social interaction, a view which lends weight to the foregoing argument. Following the same line of analysis, Mead (1934:173) contends that the self does not exist before the process of communication. Mead (1934) is quiet strident in articulating that the self is an integral part of the whole process of communication. He posits that “the origins and foundations of the self, like those of thinking are social (Mead, 1934:173). While acknowledging that self consciousness provides the core of the self through the thinking or intellectual process, Mead (1934) is quick to underscore the centrality of social contexts. Consequently, Mead’s (1934) self has multiple identities precisely for the reason that each day comes with different contexts, roles and circumstances whose varied nature demand that we grapple with them differently. If circumstances are always in motion, so too are identities since there is need to adjust and realign oneself with prevailing circumstances. This points to the ad hoc nature of identities as they are directed towards the present moment.

To bolster the foregoing argument, Woodward (2002) posits that identity links the personal and social, the self and society. In other words, identity has material bases including the social, economic, political as well as the material body. The point here is that the self is part of or an outcome of social interaction. The self is not autonomous and self sufficient which is why Woodward (2002) says that social interaction is key to the production of identities of the self. The self can therefore not be completely defined outside society since the two are inextricably linked. It is born out of a combination of what comes from within (the personal) and from without (society). Woodward (2002) puts it more succinctly by positing that the self emerges in interaction within the context of a complex, organized, differentiated society. The self therefore is a product of its relationship with others who mediate upon it the values,

meanings and symbols in specific social contexts or cultures. This has led Hall(1992:597 to conclude that identity in this sociological perspective bridges the gap between the inside and the outside-between the personal and the public. Self identity is therefore relational.

So far, the study has tried to grapple with the sociological aspects of the self in late modernity. What is distinctive about this perspective is that it emphasises the existence of external factors –social influences to the production of the self. This sociological perspective also posits that identities are constructed and that identities are fluid. However this position undermines individual agency. The perspective deprives the self of autonomy in that much as the self would engage in acts of self–creation, that creation cannot happen outside parameters and frameworks demarcated by society. This occasions the need for a more nuanced analysis of the self in late modernity where individual agency is valorized by various scholars who opt for a self reflexive definition of identity.

Scholars such as Bauman (1992), Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) stress the autonomy of the self as an agent in producing accounts of the self. Harold Garfinkel (1967) also posits that individuals are responsible for shaping their identities in late modernity. In this case, identity is no longer a social construction but a reflexivity created account of an individual’s life. The self is given almost unrestrained agency in the process of identity formation. It is critical however to emphasize at this juncture the fact that there is a subtle suggestion or undertone perhaps in these scholars ‘critiques that much as the self exercises authority and agency and takes responsibility for forging its identity, that can only happen under the pressure of social and economic change, an argument which makes sense given that the self does not live or exist as an entity. Put in another way, the self is not a free-floating individual with limitless free decisions. Calhoun (1994:27,28) succinctly observes that “identities are often personal and political projects in which we participate, empowered to greater or lesser extents by resources of experience and ability, culture and social organization. ”This point is further

reinforced by Clarke et al (2003:13) when they contend that even though identities are personal projects, they are validated and sanctioned socially. This position simply bolsters the sociological definition of the self. Having underscored this significant point it is, however, important to underscore the point that the scholars' self reflexive perception of the construction of the self is worth our attention.

In order to properly contextualise these scholars' perception of the self in late modernity, the research now shifts to focus on a brief analysis of Giddens' (1991) insightful observations on conditions obtaining in late modernity that allow for this reflexive creation of an account of an individuals' life. Giddens (1991) outlines five specificities of late modernity which in significant ways contribute to the formation of identities which are diametrically opposed to those identity indices obtaining hitherto. These include individualisation, detraditionalisation, consumption, risk and globalization all of which in one way or the other impact on social and personal life and intrude deeply into the project of the self. A separate examination of each of these characteristics of late modernity is worthy undertaking.

(a)individualisation

Giddens (1991) contends that with individualisation, traditional identities are sloughed off thus leading to the rupture of historical continuity. He further notes that the constrictions of time and space have been overcome and hence the weakening of the hold of tradition and the facilitation of individualisation. This then leads to new forms of life style and new forms of life, a point which is reinforced by Beck (1992:88) when he explains that individualisation means the variation and differentiation of life styles and forms of life opposing the thinking behind the traditional categories of large group societies including family and class ties. The traditional forms of the collective conscience recede into the background and priority is given to the individual.



Beck (1992) has some very perceptive comments on individualization which warrant a close examination. He posits that under the historical impact of individualization, “people have lost their traditional support networks and have had to rely on themselves and their own individual fate with all its attendant risks, opportunities and contradictions” (Beck, 1992:92). What this essentially means is that forms of perception are now in the private and personal domain. Thus, individualisation overrides collective fate for in Beck’s (1992:135) words, “.....everything revolves around the axis of one’s personal ego and personal life.” So, traditional identities are disembedded and there is simultaneously a re-embedding of new identities as the individual becomes the central unit of analysis, the focal point from which everything else proceeds. He is “the reproduction unit for the social in the life world” (Beck, 1992:130). This according to Beck (1994:14) leads to the development of an ego-centered worldview which would mean that “one even has to choose one’s social identity and group membership, in this way managing one’s own self, changing its image.....” Thus, the individual is the ultimate point of reference in circumstances of late modernity.

(b) Detraditionalisation

Giddens (199, 1994) notes that societies are fast becoming detraditionalised as traditions are being problematised and disembedded. There is this general spread of modern institutions and the reliance on expert systems and technology both of which are results of the widening of the field of knowledge. Therefore, there is institutional reflexivity which has rendered our lives experimental. This gives further or greater agency to the individual whose life has necessarily become self reflexive.

(c) Consumption.

Consumption patterns of action are central to identity construction in the modern epoch. In fact, according to Bocoock (1993), consumption shapes identities in late modernity in

significant ways because, as a form of cultural expression, it contributes to the regulation of society. As Bocoock (1993:112) notes, “consumption has entered the process of identity, formation and identity maintenance that it has become so central to people’s lives.....”This consumption includes information, advice, expertise, leisure events, activities and entertainment. Clarke et al (1993:15) argue that consumption, since it is a cultural phenomenon, has fundamentally changed the task of identity forging. What this essentially means is that culturally constituted lifestyles replace social structural categories such as class and gender and hence identities have been rendered hugely flexible. Consumption therefore is central in shaping individual identities in late modernity since it is now more to do with taste and perception than the need to be uniform.

(d) Risk

Giddens (1991) describes late modernity society as a risk society. It is one in which alongside possibilities, risks abound. In Giddens’ (1991) words, there are unprecedented possibilities and unparalleled dangers in late modernity. The risk that obtains is associated with techno-economic development. For Joffe (1999:3) late modernity is an era of uncertainty and unease, a phenomenon which has led to Beck (1994:3) to dub it, in oxymoronian terms, “creative self destruction.” Giddens notes that the awareness of risk has become part and parcel of individuals’ consciousness in late modernity and hence the individuals have to deal with those risks at a personal level. This had led Giddens (1994) to suggest that we are living in an epoch of reflexive modernization. In other words, Giddens is contending that, because of high risks, we constantly ask ourselves questions about how we should live. Ultimately therefore how one manages and interacts with that risk is negotiated at a personal level.

(e) Globalisation

Globalisation is defined by McGrew (1996:467) as “the intensification of global interconnectedness.” Globalising influences have a massive effect on social relations precisely for the reason that, according to Giddens (1991), global processes reduce the influences of local conditions on people’s lives as social relations are lifted out from local contexts of interaction and recombined across time and space with the consequence that local communities are subjected to global processes of decisions regarding all aspects of life. What this amounts to is the fact that individuals are disembedded from time and space, the two variables being no longer of any consequence to identity formation. In a word therefore, globalising influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self and the self ends up constructing its own identity indices.

Having gone this far, this study will forward the argument that it is under the impact of these characteristics of late modernity that identities evolve and are constantly reconfigured. According to Hall, (1996:596) traditional markers of identity such as class, race ethnicity and nationality have lost their defining powers as they are no longer giving individuals firm locations.

Therefore, one defining characteristic of the identity of the self in late modernity is that it is reflexively constructed. The identity of the self is now coming more from within than from without (social). Emphasis here is on the constructedness of identity with the self being responsible for the construction of its own identities, a point which is also underscored by Lentz (1995:306). Giddens (1991:5) notes with chilling precision that “What to do? How to act? What to be? These are the focal questions of everyone living in circumstances of late modernity and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer discursively or through day to day social behaviour. Giddens (1991:5) further explains that in the late modern epoch,

self identity is reflexive because it is born out of “..... the capacity to keep a particular narrative going..... it must continuously integrate events which occur in the external world and sort them into the on-going ‘story’ about the ‘self.’”

What is being emphasised by Giddens here is continuity. In other words, identities resist fixity and constancy. Rather, they are always in motion as they unfold “.....through the process of the sustaining of coherent yet continuously revised biographical narratives (Giddens, 1991:5). In this regard, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus as cited in Olney (1972:5) offers invaluable insights into the nature of identities when he posits that “the elements (of the cosmos) are in a continual flux and transformation, and so also are men”. Heraclitus furthers this point by declaring that “like all elements, individual man never is but is always becoming”(Olney , 1972:6).What is being emphasised here is the ephemeral and ad hoc nature of identities, a point which is furthered by Hall(1992) when he notes that post-modern identity is unstable.

The foregoing argument about the fluid nature of identity has given rise to the phenomenon of multiple identities of individuals in late modernity. This is especially so because individuals assume different characteristics and roles at different times and in different circumstances. According to Javangwe (2011) these different characters are the different versions of the self. This multiplicity in terms of identities is also acknowledged by Clarke et al (2003) who forward the argument that an individual has various identities according to the situation addressed. Hall (1996:597), also strongly insists upon these multiple identities of the self when he forwards the argument that “our personal identities as integrated subjects are undermined and the subject becomes de-centred. Hall (1996:598) goes further to note that a unified and stable identity is becoming fragmented and individuals are conceived of as having several and even contradictory identities.” Smith and Watson (2001:33) are even more definitive in their pronouncement of the fact that “because of the constant placement and

displacement of who we are, we can think of identities as multiple and as contextual, contested and contingent.” Emphasis once again is on a pluralistic sense of identity of the self. This has led Laclau (cited in Hall, 1996:599) to intimate that the self is dislocated and the centre of the self is displaced by a “plurality of power centres. “ He further posits that it is the prevalence difference which accounts for this variety of “subject positions” or identities in late modernity. The hallmarks of identities in late modernity therefore are rupture, discontinuity, dislocation and fragmentation according to Hall (1996:600).

Overallly therefore, what all these critics’ views amount to is the fact that identities are reflexively constructed in the late modern dispensation. They also underscore the fluidity and multiplicity of the identity of the self. The self is transcendental and is the ultimate point of reference in terms of identity construction. From the review of literature, this dissertation will be informed by the notion that the self is reflexively constructed. This is so because the perspective is allowed for in postcolonial theory which bodes well with my research which suggests that there are no singular, final and definitive identities. Rather, the self has multiple identities, a point which is going to be insisted upon throughout the research.

#### **1.6 Theoretical Framework upon which the Study is based**

An eclectic approach will be adopted in this research in a bid to unravel and understand the construction of Obama’s identities. This is precisely for the reason that the approach can take on board various theories which are instrumental to the construction of identities. Mainly, though, the research will be informed by postcolonial theory as well as theories of narratology.

Postcolonial theory will be used precisely for the reason that it lends itself to flexible yet critical usage since it can address the politics of identity and reaffirm openings for agency and resistance. Add more to that, it can accommodate myriad theories from which specific

selection is going to be made. Its centrality solidly rests on the fact that it engages with and problematises different categories of identity including self, gender and race.

Postcolonial theory has no definite practitioners. Neither does it have a definite time-line. What is clear, however, about this theory is that it was developed by non-western scholars with Said's Orientalism (1979) being the seminal text on the theory. In the text, Said takes the West to task for their having produced biased knowledge about the orient and having monopolised knowledge in every sphere of life. This monopoly over knowledge and representational monologue are fiercely contested in post colonial theory. As Arif Dirlik (2011) observes, post colonial theory speaks to the legacies of the past and, in Antony Chennells' (2005) words, it is a way of writing back to history as communities or individuals are obliged by their circumstances to assert themselves for their survival. Ghandi (1998:4) lends weight to this argument by contending that postcolonial theory is crucially devoted to interrogating the colonial past.

Central to all these critics' observations is that postcolonial theory is essentially deconstructionist. It allows for "...a vibrant space for critical even resistant scholarship (as well as) a contested space ..." (Shohat, 1992:108), a point which is given further impetus by Nayer (2008: XIII) when he contends that postcolonial theory is a form of resistance which "negotiates with, contests and subverts Euro-American ideologies and representations as it contests dominant discourses and all those modes of thinking that attempt to silence the marginalised.

Postcolonial theory is also anti-essentialist in terms of its thrust. It is for this reason that it focuses on hybrid representations which avoid narratives told in polarisations and essential conceptions of identity. As Ella Shohat (1992:108) observes, "hybridity ...allow(s) negotiation of the multiplicity of identities and subject positioning which results from

displacements, immigrations and exiles without policing the borders of identity along essentialist and originary lines.” What this essentially means is that postcolonial theory can accommodate various identity indices because of its flexibility. This holds true for Obama who, significantly perhaps, is situated within a multiplicity of cultural positionalities and perspectives owing to his dual racial heritage and the peripatetic kind of existence that characterises his early years.

Therefore, postcolonial theory has been privileged in this study because of its defining characteristics, chief among which is its infinite impatience with singularity in terms of meaning. It rather opts for multiplicity, a point which is given further impetus by Slemon (2001:100) when he notes that it “...is riven with disciplinary self doubt and mutual suspicion”. What is emphasised here is its insistence on the need to avoid essentialisms and going for the absolute.

For purposes of this study therefore, postcolonial theory has been opted for because, inter alia, it rebels against the notion of unitary, transparent identities and rather embraces hybridity and multiplicity as the defining contours and hallmarks of self identity. It also aims to reverse racist tropes at both the institutional and discursive levels as well as to reverse past purist notions of identity.

Secondly, narratology which is defined by Onega and Landa (1996:1) as “...the science of narrative” is indispensable in this endeavor which deals with the construction of identity. The point is, identities have no existence outside narration, hence the imperative to employ theor(ies) of narratology. These theories are important in that they deal with narrative inquiry which is concerned with language and representation as well as the detailed analysis of texts. According to Roberts (2002:5), narrative inquiry involves the dimensions of story and time.

It is imperative at this juncture to define the term narrative especially given its centrality in the definition of narratology. Onega and Landa (1996:3) go beyond and with good reason, a simple Aristotelian definition of a narrative as “a work with a plot “by positing that “a narrative is a semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and casual way”. They are even more devastatingly articulate and spot-on when they observe that “any representation involves a point of view, a selection, a perspective on the represented object, criteria of relevance, and arguably, an implicit theory of reality.” (Onega and Landa, 1996:3). What is emphasised in their definition of narrative as well as their further explanation is the art of representation. As one represents one’s life, one inevitably selects experiences and projects certain perspectives and points of view about oneself which is why Gusdorf (1980:39) defines a narrative as a personal justification. This then renders the act of narration highly political because it is devoid of innocence. If anything, it is ideologically driven and motivated.

Because this study focuses on the construction of identities, it is imperative that theories of narratology be taken on board since, according to Giddens (1991:76) “self identity as a coherent phenomenon presumes a narrative.” The import of this contention is that outside narration, there is no self to talk about. Onega and Landa (1996:4) further underscore the centrality of narrative when they contend that “narrativisation is one of the commonest ways of applying an order and a perspective to experience.” What is being emphasised here is the centrality of narration since it is through it (narration) that people can make sense of their lives in society and culture. In other words, the self has to be storied in order for it to make sense or meaning. Commenting on the value of narrativity, White (1978:24) contends that “...the value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of the desire to have real events display coherence, integrity, fullness and closure of an image of life that



is, and can only be imaginary.” Once again, representation is central here as well as the desire to achieve coherence.

So, narratology theories have been embraced because an awareness of narrativity is a very important factor in autobiography. Narrative inquiry itself is useful to get a better understanding of the formation of identities. It is indeed these fragmented sets of narrated memories and experiences that form the basis on which to mobilize individual identities and hence the centrality of this conceptual framework.

### **1.7 Research Methods**

A system of collecting data for research study is known as research methodology with the data collected being utilized either for theoretical or practical research. Aina and Ajiferuka (2002) refer to methodology as the philosophy of the research method used, data collection and methods instituted and the procedure for collecting data. There are two methods that can be applied to a research namely the qualitative and quantitative approaches.

In this study, the qualitative approach will be used since the topic is about a specific production of new knowledge. Denzin and Lincoln (2000:3) define qualitative research as “the study, use and collection of a variety of materials-case study, personal experience, introspection, life-story, interviews, artifacts, cultural texts and production that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives.”

This approach or method has been privileged because, according to Arnfred (1995:13) it “... opens possibilities for taking into account the interconnections and dialogue between (researcher) subject and researched object, proceeding by way of interpretation.” What this

means is that the qualitative approach allows for reflexive interaction during the research process.

Also, using the same method makes it possible to describe the complexity in different ways of comprehending the world in relation to context (Kalleberg, 1982:24-25). Flick (2002:2) also lends weight to this argument by valorizing the qualitative research in the analysis of social relations since it pluralises rather than essentialise, a point which Beck concurs with when he contends that diversity should be taken cognizance of since a new sensitivity is required to the study of identity construction.

Basically, the research will proceed by way of engaging in an analysis, appreciation and critique of the primary texts. This narrative inquiry is allowed for in the qualitative research method and it is useful for getting a better understanding of the formation of identities. One is enabled to explore the pluralistic sense of identity of individuals as is Obama's case as argued in this study. Material from secondary sources is also going to be used in order to underscore certain pertinent points.

### **1.8 Chapter Delineation**

The first chapter is introductory. It provides the background to study, statement of the problem and objectives of the research. The chapter also reviews literature relevant to the dissertation's thrust, provides the theoretical framework upon which the study is based and outlines the research methods that will be used.

The second Chapter titled "Exile in the land of birth and the search for spiritual anchorship" attempts to read Obama's *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995) as a symbolic search for bearings and spiritual anchorship on Obama's part. The search is

necessitated by his dual racial heritage and memories triggered by his absent father. The chapter also attempts to read into the text efforts by Obama to gain political visibility. The chapter concludes with Obama affirming both his black and political identities through narrative.

The third chapter titled “The tale of an attitude: A projection of Obama’s attitude towards different values and the American value system seeks to read Obama’s *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (2006) as the branding of the self by Obama. He seeks to spruce up his image so that he becomes one of the political references in Washington.

Chapter Four which is titled “Galvanizing the electorate and consolidating political gains” will analyse Obama’s *Change We Can Believe In: Barack Obama’s Plan to Renew America’s Promise* as a way in which Obama has grafted himself at the heart of American politics. The text will also be read as Obama’s strategy for clearing the space for himself so that he gains political power. This is so given that he launches a massive broadside at the Bush administration which he accuses of having outdated solutions to contemporary problems.

Chapter Five is the conclusion. It will evaluate how Obama has used narrative in order to get to the helm of one of the most powerful nations in the world. Thus, the centrality of autobiography in the construction of identities is going to be emphasised.

### **1.9 Conclusion**

The chapter provided the background of the problem which necessitated the research. The statement of the problem underlined the focus of the study and provided the scope of the research. Research objectives and key research questions were provided. The significance of the study that addresses the theoretical and practical value of the study was covered. Relevant literature was reviewed to try and contextualise the area of the study. In this regard; literature on autobiography and self and identity was reviewed. The chapter also provided the

theoretical framework upon which the research is based and in this respect, postcolonial theories related to identity and theories of narratology were analysed. Research methods were also outlined and explained. Lastly, chapter delineation of the dissertation was done.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Exile in the land of birth and the search for spiritual anchorship in *Dreams From my Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance***

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter was introductory. It explored the area of study, justified it, proffered the research objectives, reviewed relevant literature to contextualise the area of study, grappled with the theoretical framework that underpins the study and outlined the methodologies that will be used in carrying out the research. In this chapter, the research's thrust is to read Obama's *Dreams From My Father* (1995) as an autobiographical project which symbolises the search for origins. It is Obama's search for bearings, coherence and meaning in his life, indeed a befitting response to the exigencies of racism and the absent father. The chapter will also attempt to evaluate how Obama has deployed narrative to resolve his racial dilemma as well as to carve a political image for himself. It will be argued that the narrative has been used as a potent tool for self- definition since it enables him to affirm his black and political identities.

#### **2.2 In Search of Bearings**

Written in the bildungsroman tradition, *Dreams From My Father* (1995) covers Obama's life from birth to his entry into Harvard Law School. It traces his life from Hawaii to Jakarta back to Hawaii, to New York and then to Chicago before he makes the long trip to Kenya. These constant shifts and movements corroborate the fact that his life was hardly sedentary but

purely peripatetic. He had to make do with and acclimatise to different “exotic” locales which were at once disorientating. This, coupled with the fact of his absent father and his dual racial heritage, made it all the more imperative for him to have the desire to craft and authorise his identity. Obama thus has embarked on a project to find his identity compass to craft and authorize his identity. He is reflecting on the forces that shaped him at a self- reflexive level. The net result of this reflection is the birth of his multiple selves.

It is significant to note that Obama begins his search for firm anchorship through tracing his maternal and paternal ancestry. It is a well- calculated move meant to excavate the unadulterated self as well as to establish a concrete footing which he will use as a springboard from which to launch and consolidate self- identity. It is, according to Pattison (quoted in Veit- Wild and Chennells, 1999: 197) “a primordial ‘I’ and “self” gained prior to that gained by identification with others” that he is seeking through the tracing of his ancestry. This genealogical history which appears in the first and last sections of the text is meant to reinforce the uniqueness of the circumstances of his birth and, by extension, his identity.

Obama’s multiple selves are informed largely by, as the title of the text suggests, his absent father as well as by his dual racial heritage in a largely Manichean world. It is significant to underscore at this point the fact that Obama is his own man and hence carves his own identity. It however has to be underscored that he does so in the context of external forces that in one way or the other contribute to the shaping of individual identities. As Weintraub (1978) notes, there is always a complex interplay between the “I” and my world. The import of this is that the self can never cut itself or stand effectively in contradistinction to the bigger unit. The self is shaped by its own agency as much as it is shaped by those others around it. In

this case, Obama's identity is, to a certain extent, constructed in response to the expectations of the people around him.

His mother, for instance, tries to be a massive influence in the forging of his identity especially when they are in Indonesia where she encourages his "..... rapid acculturation....." (pg 47), teaching him to "...d disdain the blend of ignorance and arrogance that often characterised Americans abroad" (pg 47). She even realises the chasm that "...separated the life chances of an American from those of an Indonesian (and) she knew which side of the divide she wanted her son to be. I was an American, she decided, and my true life lay elsewhere" (pg47). The point here is that she tries to play a pivotal role in the carving of her son's identity. Her injunction that "if you want to grow into a human being you're going to need some values" (pg49) also lends weight to the foregoing argument. In her spirited endeavours to define her son, "she (has) only one ally...and that was the distant authority of my father" (pg50). So, she tries as much as possible to instill in him a sense of the need to exercise responsibility and control over his life. She exhorts him to take a cue from his father and demonstrate disciplined focus in order for him to be successful in life. In fact, to his mother it is not a matter of choice for, as he observes, "I would follow his example, my mother decided. I had no choice. It was in the genes" (pg50).

In open confirmation of Giddens' (1991) contention that self-identity is a personal project in the late modern epoch, Obama seeks to define himself at a self-reflexive level rather than limit himself to how his mother wants him defined. He chillingly records that "away from my mother, away from my grandparents, I was engaged in a fitful interior struggle. I was trying to raise myself to be a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance, no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant" (pg 76). The import of this is that the

self has been thrust at the centre of the construction of its own identity. Much as his mother would want to invoke the distant authority of his father to shape his identity, Obama remains his own man as he suspects that his mother's "...account of the world and (his) father's place in it, was somehow incomplete" (pg 52).

As he is involved in the organising of black folks in Chicago, church leaders encourage him to assume a religious identity in order for him to be successful in reaching out to the people and implementing programmes but he remains reluctant. He insists that "... I remained a reluctant skeptic, doubtful of my own motives, wary of expedient conversion, having too many quarrels with God to accept salvation too easily won" (pg 286 – 287). The point here, once again is that, external forces are critical to the shaping of his identity but ultimately he remains his own man and forges his self-identity at a self-reflexive level.

That having been said, it is only proper that the research now shifts to focus on how Obama constructs his identities and in the process establish meaning and coherence in his life. Obama makes the large statement that "I had no idea who my own self was..." (pg 82). This makes it quite imperative for him to forge an identity for himself and the starting point for him to authorise his identity can be logically traced to the influence his absent father has on him. In fact, about *Dreams From My Father* (1995), Obama says it is "a record of a personal, interior journey- a boy's search for his father and through that search, a workable meaning for his life as a black American" (pg xvi). His identity therefore is, as has already been intimated, informed by this vague man, his father. This is why the narrative is largely informed by meditations on the influential but absent father.



Obama deploys memory to construct mental images of his father which will in turn help him come to terms with his own identity. His father largely remains elusive, impalpable and ghost-like but all the same he is a remote source of inspiration for Obama. Obama notes that “at the time of his death, my father remained a myth to me, both more and less than a man” (pg 5). He is largely opaque and impenetrable, just “a present mass” (pg 71). Auma could not have been more accurate when she sums up Obama Senior as someone who was beyond the scope and comprehension of many. She says “I can’t say I really knew him, Barack... Maybe nobody did... not really. His life was so scattered. People only knew scraps and pieces, even his own children” (pg 212).

Since he is inundated with stories about his father from early on in his life, Obama has this dogged determination to piece together those stories so that his father becomes comprehensible. As he says in the preface to *Dreams From My Father* (1995: xiv), “I remembered the stories that my mother and her parents told me as a child, the stories of a family trying to explain itself”. Unfortunately for him, the stories about his father told “...less about the man himself than about the changes that had taken place in the people around him...” (pg 25). It is this jig-saw puzzle therefore, that Obama wishes to solve and, by extension, forge his own identity.

All the stories about his father converge on the point that he was something of an enigma, endowed as he was with great virtues. This explains why Obama wants to fashion his identity after his father’s image as he notes that he “...realized...how even in his absence his strong image had given me some bulwark on which to grow up, an image to live up to or to disappoint” (pg 129). Obama is even more strident when he notes the effect the images of his father had on him. He notes that “it was into my father’s image, the black man, son of Africa,

that I had packed all the attributes that I sought in myself, the attributes of Martin and Malcolm, Dubois and Mandela” (pg 220). His identity, thus, is inextricably linked to his father’s. However, it is significant to underscore the fact that autobiography is a retrospective rendition of a life lived and as such, it is deployed for purposes of projecting certain identity indices of the subject narrator. Obama admits to this fact when he observes that

I learned long ago to distrust my childhood and the stories that shaped it. It was only many years later ...that I could circle back and evaluate these early stories for myself. Or, more accurately, it was only then that I understood that I had spent much of my life trying to rewrite these stories, plugging up holes in the narrative, accommodating unwelcome details, projecting individual choices... (pg xv-xvi).

Emphasis here is on rewriting, plugging up of holes and projecting individual choices which he retrospectively does in order to come to terms with this seemingly omnipresent force that shaped his life.

Secondly, Obama forges and authorises his identity within the cultural matrix of white supremacy which deems him and his like as the subaltern. A victim of the American racial conundrum and double consciousness (Dubois, 1903) largely due to the racially divided circumstances of his birth, Obama necessarily constructs his self-identity within this confounding scheme of things. As he notes in the preface, “they no longer know who I am. Privately, they guess at my troubled heart, I suppose- the mixed blood, the divided soul, the ghostly image of the tragic mulatto trapped between two worlds” (pg xv). This in a way is an identity that is being thrust on him by the world but which he is engaged in earnest endeavours to reject and in the process assert his own.

Obama searches for an identity of the self which is linked to the African collective precisely for the reason that the African American history is inextricably linked to the arithmetic of identity politics due to pervasive racism. This makes sense because, as Gusdorf (2001) observes, autobiography does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it is written in a specific culture. This point is furthered by Chennells and Vambe (2009: 2) when they posit that “while we register our interest in the particularity of lived lives, we cannot remain indifferent to the way in which those lives are inscribed by the larger contexts in which they are lived... we are never free from the pressures of global history .” Hunt (2010:234) lends weight to this argument when she contends that

the vicissitudes of upbringing including material and emotional constraints, the pressure of powerful narrative and discourse in societies and the cultures in which human beings are embedded are critical to the formulation of who individuals are as well as to the provision of a coherence.

The point here is that cultural dynamics and imperatives are instrumental in the crafting of identities.

Because Obama is embedded in this cultural matrix of racism, it is only prudent that he declares that “My identity might begin with the fact of my race but it didn’t, couldn’t end there” (pg111). Emphasis here is on the fact that identity should not be a given as individuals have the agency to authorize their own desired identities. Thus, while it is clear that Obama is embedding himself within the black fold, there is also this suggestion that as he integrates himself into the African fold, he is ultimately an individual who would relate with his black community on his own terms. There is a general progression in terms of the development of his race-consciousness. At one point he confesses that he was “ too young to know that (he) needed a race” (pg 27) and at another , he asserts that “that my father looked nothing like the people around me-that he was black as pitch ... barely registered in my mind”(10). When he

then becomes acutely aware of pervasive racism, he is motivated to craft and authorise an identity that is at one with the black people.

When he enrolls at Punahou Academy, he is made a laughing stock and the butt of cruel jokes because he is black. He ends up getting assailed by "... that sense that I didn't belong" (pg 60). Even more devastatingly salutary is his realisation that his grandmother harbours fear of blacks. This has the effect of making him realise "... for the first time that I was utterly alone" (pg91). His association with other blacks such as Frank, Marcus and Regina also serves to corroborate the existence of the colour bar and helps him explain black rage, anger and frustration. His reading of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* which he describes as "a racial book" (pg 103) enables him to come to terms with the strained relations between blacks and whites.

Obama is thus disorientated by this staggering state of affairs and he tries various means to come to terms with his own identity. At one point he seeks answers to the Americans racial problem via books by fellow black Americans including Baldwin, Ellison, Hughes, Wright and DuBois but still the answers are elusive. To him, "only Malcolm X's autobiography seemed to offer something different. His repeated acts of self-creation spoke to me." (pg89) He aligns himself with Malcolm X's insistence on respect and the possibility of blacks and whites embracing each other and working together for the good of America. All the same, a fulfilling sense of self is hard to come by as he realises that the world he inhabits is "a white man's world" (pg 85). At another point he resorts to drinking and smoking as a mode of self obliteration. As he notes, he was "trying something that could push questions of who I was out of my mind ... something that could blur the edges of my memory." (pg 93-94) The point here is that there is pervasive racism in America which heavily militates against the blacks' attainment of a fulfilling sense of self. This is why Reverend Wright tells Obama that "life is not very safe for a black man in this country, Barack. Never has been. Probably never will

be.”(pg 284). There is a great deal of suspicion between the races which is why even in bathrooms at Columbia University, “...no matter how many times the administration tried to paint them , the walls remained scratched with blunt correspondences between niggers and kikes.” (pg 121).

This awareness of incontrovertible evidence of racial polarisation makes Obama want to establish his bearings, his place in the world. To him, that identity of him as the subaltern and “natural inferior” that has been imposed on him by the white world does not hold any sway which is why he has this fierce determination to slough it off. He constantly probes and is openly critical of such an objectionable state of affairs. Through this, Obama is merely confirming Giddens’ (1991) assertion that we do not discover our identities in the late modern epoch. Rather, we construct them after our own image as we respond to the vagaries of time and circumstances. As he says, his life “can’t be static or tidy” (pg377) since at time “...hard choices ...” (pg377) would have to be made in the authorisation of one’s’ identity.

This section has tried to emphasise the two critical aspects-his absent father whose image , ironically is a constant companion and his dual racial heritage-that make him have the quest to authorise his identity. They also motivate him to go to Kenya so that he can get a fulfilling sense of self. So, in a way, his meditation about the absent father and his aligning himself with the black race can be read as a way in which Obama has tried to find his bearings in the world , a point which is going to be further explored in a later section in this chapter.

## **2.2 Sowing the Seeds of Political Visibility**

In this section, the chapter will forward the argument that Obama subtly scaffolds his image as he invests heavily into his political development. In this respect therefore, *Dreams From My Father*(1995) can be read as an open confirmation of Berryman’s (1991) contention that any personal statement is a political act and that all forms of social and political discourse

both disguise and promote definitions of the self. It is strongly apparent that in *Dreams From My Father* (1995), the narrative emphasis is deliberately tilted towards Obama's political development.

So, for all his claims to be scrupulously honest and unbiased as he notes in his introduction to the text when he states the position that "... what I have tried to do is write an honest account of a particular province of my life" (pg xvii), in actual fact he is simply trying to prop himself up so that he becomes politically visible and relevant in the scheme of things in America. Herein lies the centrality of life narrative in defining who individuals are. Onega and Landa (1996:39) define narrative as "the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way." Emphasis here is on the art of representation which also implies selection of experiences which enable individuals to project certain desirable perspectives about the self. As Javangwe (2011) notes, the autobiographical narrative process is an act of constructing the narrator's own cosmos in which everything else is ordered and re-ordered to suit the narrator's needs. While individuals are conceived of as having a multiplicity of identities in the late modern epoch, narrative has the capacity to conveniently bury the individuals' other selves as it is primarily devoted to forwarding the agenda of the narrator. This is why Gusdorf (1980:89) defines a narrative as 'a personal justification.' According to Porter (2011:121), narrative is a constituent part of the self, since we are who we say we are. He goes further to say that our identity does not precede our story of ourselves.

That having been said in the reading of autobiography, it is pertinent to observe that the narrative in *Dreams From My Father* (1995) whose lifeblood is Obama's meditation on his absent father endeavours to project Obama in as favourable and as positive a manner as possible. He does that quite deliberately as he is aware that it is going to put him on the threshold of important developments especially in terms of his political life. He is his own

diplomat as he spruces up his image as the ultimate organisational man with massive leadership potential. Though his political rise is not meteoric per se, at least we can discern the political trajectory that his life is taking till he gets to the position that we see in *Change We Can Believe In* (2008). So, in a way, in *Dreams From My Father*(1995), Obama is jump-starting his political career.

It is not for nothing therefore that Obama has this seeming obsession with trying to project his father in a very positive light. Those positive qualities of his father that he chronicles, including confidence, strength, determination and disciplined focus have rubbed off onto him, and that can qualify him to be one of the political references in America. In fact, he is deeply inspired by his father and he is determined to live up to his image.

His involvement in the divestment campaign which essentially deals with the problems in Apartheid South Africa is strategic. Commenting on his role in the campaign, Obama records that “I found myself drawn into a larger role ...arguing strategy” (pg 105). Further, he takes it as “...a bridge between my future and past” (pg105) as he makes the discovery that “people had begun to listen to my opinion” (pg105), a discovery that makes him hungry for words to support an idea. What this amounts to is the fact that Obama is projecting himself as someone with massive leadership potential. His evaluation of the situation obtaining in South Africa is that it “.... demands we choose sides. Not between black and white ... it’s a choice between dignity and servitude. Between fairness and justice” (pg106). In this respect, Obama is speaking not along racial lines in order for him to appeal to every American, black or white. Thus, he is scaffolding his image as someone with the capacity to transform America which is mired as it were in the racial conundrum.

Also, the larger part of the second section of the text is devoted to Obamas’ sowing the seeds of his political aspirations. Pertinent to observe here is that he is firmly rooting his political

loyalties on his black identity. Whilst his gaze is on the larger picture-the White House- he realises that the route to get there is via the mobilisation of black folks. In a sense therefore, he is embedding himself in the American political discourse slowly but surely. When asked why he wants to get involved in organising, he pronounces

the need for change. Change in the White House, where Reagan and his minions were carrying on their dirty deeds. Change in the Congress, compliant and corrupt. Change in the mood of the country, manic and self-absorbed. Change won't come from the top.... change will come from a mobilized grass roots (pg133).

In a way therefore, Obama is clearing the space for himself so that he can entrench himself on the American political scene.

Obama achieves a milestone in terms of his political aspirations through organising. He comments that

now with the benefit of hindsight, I can construct a certain logic to my decision, show how becoming an organizer was a part of that larger narrative, starting with my father and his father before him, my mother and her parents ... I can see that my choices were never truly mine alone and that is how it should be, that to assert otherwise is to chase after sorry sort of freedom (pg 133-134).



At this point, Obama presents himself as a selfless man with a disproportionately large sense of sacrifice as he attends to the urgent needs of others. He does not aspire for personal glory but endeavours to seek redress in collective redemption, for, as Regina's corrective comments to him indicate, "it's not just about you.... It's about the people who need your help ..." (pg109). It is not surprising therefore that the narrative is replete with incontrovertible evidence of how massively transformed the black neighborhood has been, owing to his unrelenting zeal and determination. He manages to effect reform in public schools, in matters to do with crime and health, especially in the Altgeld asbestos issue which not surprisingly, catapults him into political visibility. By his own admission he "changed as a result of that .... In a fundamental way" (pg242).

At every turn of the narrative in the second section of the text therefore, there are intimations that Obama grows remarkably in stature through organising. He announces his presence and local politicians begin to take notice of him. Even his colleagues appreciate and approve of his political astuteness. Through narrative therefore, Obama is deliberating entrenching himself at the centre of American politics, of course starting with his mobilisation of black folks. Ultimately however, he wants to appeal to every American which is why he definitively pronounces that

communities had to be created, fought for, tended like gardens –  
because this community I imagined was still in the making, built  
on the promise that the larger American community, black, white,  
and brown could somehow redefine itself- I believed that it might,  
over time, admit the uniqueness of my own life (pg 135).

Obama is obliquely canvassing for acceptance as he gives the example of his own life as a maker of the possibility of the con-joining of the two perennially antagonistic races. To him “with a bit of translation on my part, the two worlds would eventually cohere” (pg82). As a border-dancing personality in terms of his identity, Obama nurses the hope that blacks and whites understand each other and let racial harmony prevail for

our sense of wholeness would have to arise from something more

fine than the bloodlines we have inherited... it will have to find

root in (the) contradictory details of our experience (pg204).

It is this understanding between the two races that he asks for so that he realises his political aspirations. It is precisely for this reason that he finds it imperative to narrate his experiences in Hawaii. His being in Hawaii is a strategic positioning of the self since it is, according to him “... a melting pot, an experiment in racial harmony” (p24) and a place in whose surroundings “.... my racial stock caused my grandparents few problems ...” (p25”. This explains why his father positively evaluates Hawaii when he posits that “one thing other nations can learn from Hawaii... is the willingness of races to work together toward common development ...” (p26). It is only through this ability to cut across the great racial divide that his ascendancy to power can be guaranteed and he is projecting himself as more than capable of doing that.

To consolidate his political aspirations, Obama makes the landmark decision to go to Law school. Law’s centrality in unraveling the esoteric and opaque language of state structures is emphasised. He definitively declares that

And I had things to learn in law school, things that would help

me bring about real change. I would learn about ... the legislative

process... I would learn power's currency in all its intricacy and detail, knowledge... that I could now bring back to where it was needed ... bring it back like Promethean fire (p276).

It is therefore not for nothing that he decides to join law since the objective is to assume political visibility. To him, going to law school is "... less a time of discovery than consolidation, of doing the things that we tell ourselves we finally must do to grow up" (pg 437). To him once again, the centrality of law needs not be over-emphasised. It is "... a memory (since it) records a long-running conversation, a nation arguing with its conscience" (pg 437).

The point here is that Obama is carving a political identity for himself at a self-reflexive level, but always acutely aware of the near-insurmountable challenges that stand in his way in his bid to transform the world. He is asserting himself as it were, and creating space for himself at the heart of American politics not by dint of chance but by his being a deserving candidate. There are no surprises at all for he saw it coming. His being a progeny of a father who possesses exceptional qualities makes him an ultimately ideal political candidate who has the capacity to cut across the great racial divide, but always cognizant of the fact that charity begins at home. This is why he initially builds up his political profile in black neighborhoods before he embraces a more inclusive and universal vision for how communities need to work together to create change. He has deployed his family history as a means to a political end. It is a good example of the possibility of arriving at some common ground that humanity shares values and principles around which they can organize and make for a better life. It is only fitting, therefore that he makes reference to Thomas Jefferson's words at America's Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self evident"

(437) as they corroborate the centrality of values and principles that can bind a people together.

### **2.3. Self-embedding: Authenticating and Affirming his Africanness**

This section of the chapter attempts to view Obama's visit of Kenya as a symbolic act of authenticating and affirming his Africanness. It is an act of establishing a firm grounding and a spiritual anchorship for himself. The need for him to do this should not ruffle any feathers given that he is an in-between in terms of his identity. Neither his father, mother nor grandparents share his mulatto experience and hence the more urgent the need for him to self reflexively define himself. He has to decide which side of the fence to fall on or else he will remain a boarder-line case, existing on the fringes of the two worlds. In open confirmation of Pascal's (1960) observation that autobiography proper is a retrospective account which involves the search for a "true" "self", Obama's pilgrimage to Kenya is projected as a way in which he quests for wholeness and a fulfilling sense of self.

Perhaps taking a cue from the encouragement he gets from various individuals including Auma, Johnnie and Asante who actually pronounces that "when you do make the trip, it will change your life "(pg 259), but above all the injunction from his father that "the important thing is that you know your people and that you also know where you belong" (pg 144), Obama decides to make the long trip to Kenya. Prior to this trip, he visits Europe where he realises that he is assailed by a sense of not belonging. He notes that while in Europe he "...felt as though (he) was living at someone else's romance, the incompleteness of (his) own history stood between (him) and the sites (he) saw like a hard pane of glass" (pg 301). This motivates the need for him to try and solidly locate himself since there is this sense of the void, of the abyss that needs to be filled. He observes that "I had been forced to look

inside myself and had found only a great emptiness there” (pg 302). This self scrutiny according to Giddens is (1991) a constituent part of late modernity. He further agonises about the implications of his journey as he asks “Will this trip to Kenya finally fill that emptiness?” (pg 303). The import of this is that the identity of the self is being arrived at a self reflexive level.

To emphasise his spiritual links to Africa Obama’s journey to Kenya is viewed as a pilgrimage by Asante. From a spiritual point of view, pilgrimage is extremely important in that it enables one to connect with spiritual beings. It is at once a marker of spiritual revival as well as a reassurance of one’s faith. Perhaps more significantly about pilgrimage is the fact that it brings a sense of belonging to the pilgrims. It is central in that it conveys a sense of identity. In this respect therefore, Obama’s pilgrimage to Kenya has to be read as such. He embarks on the journey to Kenya in order to get a fulfilling sense of who he is. Will, one of Obama’s organising partners in Chicago, equates it to *Roots*. Perhaps taking a cue from Alex Haley’s epic *Roots* the roots that Will talks of at this point are suggestive of origins. Obama has therefore embarked on a journey that will take him to his origins. It is the correct route to his roots, and true to its ultimate objective, the journey fulfills his quest for spiritual anchorship. He intones that “for the first time in my life, I felt the comfort, the firmness of identity that a name might provide, how it could carry an entire history in other people’s memories ...” (pg 305) after Miss Omoro recognises his name at Kenyatta International Airport. Because it had never happened to him before, this seemingly inconsequential episode is emphasised to highlight its centrality. To him, nothing else matters since the most important thing is that “my name belonged, and so I belonged...” (pg305).

Once he is in Kenya, he becomes sure-footed in terms of how to carve his own identity because, as he observes, “here the world was black, and so you were just you. You could discover all those things that were unique to your life without living a lie or committing

betrayal (pg311). For the first time also, he starts experiencing the real significance of family which he views as a whole connection of people where even "... the dead..... (have) their claims, their voices shaping the course of one`s dream" (pg 338). In a way, he is consummating his sense of belonging to Africa as he feels "... that a circle was beginning to close, so that I might finally recognize myself as I was, here, now, in one place (pg367).

Obama`s realisation of who he is comes about as some kind of epiphany. He realises that his identity is inextricably linked to his ancestry and hence, he can only meaningfully forge it within that context. Having journeyed throughout his life in search of his identity, he finally comes full circle. While standing before his father and grandfather`s graves, he intones that

I felt the circle finally close. I realised 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....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 questions were my brothers` questions. Their struggle, my birthright (pg 430).

What Obama has done here is to unequivocally assert his position. He is an African. He and he alone is responsible for making that choice. His journey thus, has enabled him to put perspective on his mixed- race heritage and he has affirmed his African and black identity.

However, it has to be underscored that Obama expresses his freedom to relate with his new-found community on his own terms especially in matters to do with the authorisation of his self identity. He will have it his way. He does not allow anyone to boss him into assuming a

particular identity posture for as he says, “even here in Africa...no one...could tell me what my blood ties demanded or how these demands could be reconciled with some larger idea of human association” (pg 331). The point here is that the identity of the self in circumstances of late modernity as Giddens (1991) notes, is a personal project. Thus, having embraced his African heritage, Obama does not allow himself to be totally subsumed into the African fold as he still retains markers of being his own man.

For instance, Obama does not subscribe to identity stereotypes. He quarrels with some of his family members because they still work with “...older maps of identity, more ancient loyalties” (pg 348). He does not want to, in the words of Dr Rukia Odera, “...end up clinging to all sorts of things that have outlived their usefulness. Polygamy, Collective land ownership. These things worked well in their time” (pg 434). Obama thus, is mindful of the fluidity of identities which perhaps is also why he asserts that “boys don’t want to follow their fathers’ tired footsteps” (pg79). To him, “the imperatives of harvest or work in the factory aren’t supposed to dictate identity, so that how to live is bought off the rack or found in magazines” (pg79). This is an infinitely new way of viewing the world and it is quite consistent with conditions obtaining in late modernity.

This new way of seeing the world explains why Obama totally agrees with his uncle, Sayid who is largely projected as a rational voice especially because of his insightful comments. Sayid asserts that “a man does service for his people by doing what is right for him..... not by doing what others think he should do...” (pg390). This observation, coupled with his injunction that

You must respect your elders. They clear the way for you so that

your path is easier. But if you see them falling into a pit... diverge

from that path and make your own” (pg390-391)

are very powerful statements indicative of a reflexive definition of the self. In this respect, Obama is confirming Porter’s (2011:121) observation that “while we are products of determinative forces-economic, cultural and political- that might appear to condition not only our lives but our sense of self, we are nevertheless not without the free agency to perform acts of self-fashioning”. Emphasis here is squarely placed on the autonomy that individuals have in authorising their identities and this is precisely what has been done by Obama in *Dreams From My Father* (1995).

In the final analysis, Obama has used narrative to help him resolve his racial dilemma as well as to spruce up his political image. Through narrative, he has been enabled to affirm his black identity. As he says in his interview with Bill Thompson (2008:5),

I think the book was cathartic to some degree. I think what it did was to help me reclaim both sides of my heritage, helped me to understand that I think that most of my life had been- and has been- spent in pursuit of values and principles that I can live by, as an individual and that I think all groups share”.

Commenting on the centrality of narrative, Gikandi (1992:384) posits that it “... is crucial to the discovery of our selfhood. The text is the mirror in which the subject will see itself reflected”. Thus, Obama has storied himself in order for him to assume particular identity postures. He has affirmed his black identity as well as announced his political aspirations.



## **Conclusion**

The chapter has attempted to read *Dreams From My Father* (1995) as a symbolic search for origins. The search is motivated by the exigencies of the absent father and his being a victim of racism. The chapter also touched on Obama's establishing of his political visibility in America. The chapter then concluded with the position that Obama has used narrative to affirm his black identity as well as to spruce up his political image.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **The Tale of an Attitude: A Projection of Obama's Attitude towards Different Values and the American Value System as Reflected in *The Audacity Of Hope: Thoughts On Reclaiming The American Dream***

#### **3.0 Introduction**

The previous chapter analysed Obama's *Dreams From My Father: A story of Race and Inheritance* (1995) as his search for origins. It explored Obama's endeavours to establish his identity and concluded with the assertion that Obama has affirmed his black identity. The chapter also explored the ways in which Obama has established a political identity for himself.

This current chapter builds on those two positions that Obama has carved both black and political identities for himself. In fact, Obama observes that his work in Chicago as an organizer which propelled him into political limelight both "fortified my racial identity and confirmed my belief in the capacity of ordinary people to do extra ordinary things" (p206). It is in light of this "capacity of ordinary people to do extra ordinary things" that *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts On Reclaiming The American Dream* (2006) will be read as the branding of Obama as he seeks to spruce up his image in order for him to become the ultimate political reference in Washington. Because it veers from orthodox autobiography, *The Audacity of Hope's* (2006) analysis will largely be informed by Olney's (1972) assertion that an autobiography is a product of man's creative impulse, and as such, the form it takes at any given time is unpredictable as well as Berryman's (1999:72) contention that autobiography

refers to “the many different accounts that authors make of their experiences”. Because the chapter analyses Obama’s stance in relation to different values and principles, it will be imperative to employ theories of narratology. This is precisely for the reason that narration by its very nature and in whatever form it comes is not an innocent act. If anything, narrative is deployed for purposes of scaffolding the identity of the self in relation to the bigger community.

While it is largely true that the chapter will attempt to establish Obama’s attitude towards different values, it will be argued that *The Audacity of Hope*(2006) is not a mere catalogue of Obama’s political convictions. Rather, it is Obama’s treatise which establishes a spruced up political image for him. Obama is placing himself at the centre of American politics which is why he effectively establishes a link between himself and the American political who-is-who including the Founding Fathers and Presidents former and current.

### **3.1 Speaking Positions: The Quest for Political Sainthood**

Preceding his campaign for presidency and written when Obama is a United States of America Senator, *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) is an unusual blend of autobiography and policy articulation. In the text Obama extensively discusses a host of critical issues including the constitution, politics, religion, values, government reform, education and health care which affect people across the American political and social spectrum before firming up on particular positions regarding those issues. In line with Giddens’ (1991) contention that reflexivity is realised in the extreme in circumstances of late modernity, it is crucial to underscore the fact that Obama’s attitude towards different values as reflected in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) is largely a result of carefully reasoned reflection, meditation and

deduction. Nothing seems to escape his intellectual radar as he is intensely critical of every conceivable issue and this is an excellent index of reflexivity.

This section will attempt to establish the speaking positions that Obama has adopted in the text. Before inserting himself within the American political discourse, Obama begins by positing that “perhaps more than any other time in our recent history, we need a new kind of politics, one that can excavate and build upon those shared understandings that pull us together as Americans” (pg9). This reflects that Obama is acutely aware of the enormous challenges that America is facing politically. He goes further to remark that

I imagine they are waiting for a politics with the maturity to balance idealism and realism, to distinguish between what can and cannot be compromised, to admit the possibility that the other side might sometimes have a point. (pg42)

The import of this contention is that Obama is that politician who will usher in such a new political dispensation as he obliquely projects himself as some kind of a political Messiah with solutions to America’s ills. His is an interventionist approach as he deliberately inserts himself at the centre of the intricate American politics in order for him to fix a broken system. However, Obama finds it imperative to categorically state the position from which he will be articulating issues. Firstly, he declares that “I am a Democrat, after all...” (pg10). Secondly, he posits that

I am a prisoner of my own biography. I can’t help but view the American experience through the lens of a black man of mixed heritage, forever mindful of how generations of people who looked like me were subjugated

and stigmatized and the subtle and not so subtle ways that race and class continue to shape our lives (pg 10).

However, one will be forgiven for thinking that Obama will offer a jaundiced and lop-sided view of issues because he is a Democrat and has a double racial heritage. In fact, Obama speaks from a seemingly non-partisan perspective. His speaking position in *The audacity of Hope* (2006) is moderate and leans on the progressive end. He is a deliberative politician who values consensus building. Obama sets the tone for his political rise courtesy of adopting this somewhat cautious, middle of the road and even philosophic approach. According to Hunt (2010), this is allowed for in autobiography which both provides space for many different voices- of the self and significant others- to engage with each other and offers a more fluid and multi- levelled mode of thinking.

One gets a clear impression from *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) that Obama speaks from an individuated perspective. He possesses a remarkable political and critical awareness. While he claims to speak for the disenfranchised as reflected through his remark that “I am angry about policies that consistently favor the wealthy and powerful over the average Americans” (pg10), those disenfranchised are not romanticized either. This is why he also rejects “...politics that is based solely on racial identity sexual orientation or victimhood generally” (pg11). This reflects that Obama tries to carve a unique political identity for himself. It is indeed a perspective hitherto unheard of and hence is freshly personal. He is presenting himself as a moderate and rational politician and emphasis is on the point that Obama is his own man who clamours for a complete paradigm shift in terms of people’s political mindset.

It is the nature of political life writing that it places the self at the centre. This is what we see being negotiated by Obama in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006). He projects himself as a far-sighted politician who is not influenced by short-term political gains. His is a dynamic and forward-looking politics which transcends party loyalties as if to imply that he is rationality incarnate. He has a good balance between ambition and humility: ambition because he wants to make it to the White House and humility because he knows the hurdles that litter the way to the White House.

Interestingly, Obama is mindful of the fact that this non-partisan stance he has adopted will not endear him with politicians on either side of the American political divide but he does not mind that. As he notes:

Some of these views will get me in trouble. I am new enough on the national political scene that I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views. As such, I am bound to disappoint some, if not all, of them (pg 11).

What this essentially means is that Obama is carving his own political identity at a self-reflexive level with no one dictating to him to assume a particular identity posture. He is even at odds with his own Democratic Party which he accuses of being "...smug, detached and dogmatic at times" (pg10) and for having become "...a Party of reaction" (pg39). Obama is also bold enough to suggest that where the Republicans get it right, it has to be accepted as such because, to him, "the political labels of liberal or conservative rarely track people's personal attributes" (pg 51).

Obama is not afraid to constantly make reference to the shared values and ideals that connect the American people even though he is aware that

In such a climate, any assertion of shared ideals or common values might seem hopelessly naïve if not downright dangerous- an attempt to gloss over serious differences in policy and performance (pg8).

What this amounts to is the fact that Obama chooses to remain his own man. As far as he is concerned, he wants to “retain that kernel of truth, that singular voice within each of us that reminds us of our deepest commitments” (pg11). This implies that identity has to be forged at a very personal level. To him, any politician who is worth his salt should be prepared to “... fight with their friends and enemies... and risk what they already have” (pg134). After all, as he observes in the enormously significant statement that he makes, “... I am answerable to the steady gaze of my own conscience” (pg134) which means that he would not trade his principles for anything, even for the love of his political party. Obama also chillingly observes that he “... established a reputation for speaking my mind on hard issues- a reputation that would carry me through a tough Democratic primary” (pg 295) to emphasise the point that in the late modern dispensation identity is a personal project over which the self is responsible.

Obama’s non- partisan speaking position in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) confirms Giddens (1991) and Beck’s (1992) contention that in the late modern dispensation, it is individualism which ultimately prevails. Thus he presents himself as a different mould of politician- one who does not have “the hunger to please” or has “the fear of loss” (pg11) but will simply be

honest and tell it like it is, of course always remaining rational, level-headed and as flexible as situations and circumstances would allow. In a way therefore, he projects himself as a political saint of sorts. Herein lies the scaffolding acts in autobiography. Obama is quite aware that the speaking position he has adopted will not hamstring his political ambition. To the uninitiated at least, it would appear as if he is neutral in terms of his poise but the truth of the matter is that he is being coy. He is obliquely scaffolding his image in order for him to entrench himself at the heart of American politics. He notes that

My views on healthcare or education or foreign policy are not so much more refined than when I labored in obscurity as a community organizer. If I am wiser, it is mainly because I have travelled a little further down the path I have chosen for myself, the path of politics and gotten a glimpse of where it may lead, for good or for ill (pg 360).

Thus, Obama, because of the speaking position he has adopted projects himself as a tactful politician who is making this enormous attempt to manoeuvre within the complex world of American politics which on its own is a marker of his political shrewdness. The speaking position he has adopted is being used as a means to an end which in this case is being at the pinnacle of American politics. Obama's speaking position corroborates Coullie et al's (2006) assertion that autobiographical narrative is pivotal in that it scaffolds agency. In other words, our potential futures are imagined through the images we create about our present selves. His speaking position answers the question, "Who do I want to become?" (Javangwe, (2011: 45).

### **3.2 What needs to be done: Charting a New Political Dispensation**



In this section, *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) will be analysed as a means by which Obama has inserted himself on the grand stage of American politics. He robustly discusses what has to be done if America is to move forward politically and in the process he defines a new political dispensation in America. To begin with, Obama asserts that Americans are downcast because they have a cynicism "...that had been nourished by a generation of broken promises" (pg1). They are "... weary of the dead zone that politics has become in which narrow interests vie for advantage and ideological minorities seek to impose their own versions of truth" (pg9). It is this state of affairs that he wishes to ameliorate as he states that the main thrust of *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) is to explore "...how we might begin the process of changing our politics and our civic life" (pg9). In order to effect that change effectively, Americans have to first and foremost realise that "...there was- and always had been another tradition to politics...based on the simple idea that we have a stake in one another, and that what binds us together is greater than what drives us apart" (pg2).

In his discussion of what can be the panacea to America's political, economic and social ills, Obama disguises his personal political ambition by making use of the collective voice. He also plays the ignorant and naïve in terms of how to resolve America's problems. On a number of issues, Obama pronounces that "I won't pretend to have all the answers" or that "I don't pretend to have this grand strategy in my hip pocket. But I know what I believe" (pg303). In fact Obama is modest enough to express the fact that he does not have easy answers to solving America's problems. As he observes

This isn't to say that I know exactly how to do it. I don't ... my treatment of issues is often partial and incomplete. I offer no unifying theory of American government, nor do these pages provide a manifesto for action

.... what I offer is something more modest: personal reflections on those values and ideals that have led me to public life, some thoughts on the ways that our current political discourse unnecessarily divides us, and my own best assessment-based on my own experience as a Senator and Lawyer, husband and father, Christian and Skeptic-of the ways we can ground our politics in the notion of a common good (pg 9).

In all this, Obama is being deliberately coy and it is an attempt to manoeuvre on his part so that he establishes political relevance for himself. In other words, Obama is trying to make his political posturing coherent, in glorious affirmation of Gusdorf's (2001) contention that a narrative is a personal justification and in the process embed himself within the American political discourse.

It is only prudent that Obama's attitude towards some of the issues that affect Americans in relation to what he thinks should be done to regularise that state of affairs be explored at this juncture. This will go a long way towards clarifying the kind of politician that he projects of himself.

Firstly, Obama is of the considered opinion that Americans should move away from stuckness and fixity especially in terms of their party loyalties. The party politics that is engaged in by Democrats and Republicans should be shunned because it "... keeps us locked in "either /or" thinking ....It is such doctrinaire thinking and stark partisanship that have turned Americans off of politics" (pg40). To him, politicians should engage in politics that is "... constructed from the best of our traditions .... (that which) will have to remind ourselves, despite all our differences, just how much we share: common hopes, common dreams, a common bond that will not break" (pg25). What is emphasised here is the centrality of moving beyond party politics which is why Obama also posits that even during elections

Eking out a bare Democratic majority isn't good enough. What's needed is a broad majority of Americans-Democrats, Republicans and independents of goodwill –who are re-engaged in the project of national renewal, and who see their own self interest as inextricably linked to the interest of others (pg40).

This allows for development to accrue to the country since the party will be playing second fiddle to the interests of the collective.

In terms of his attitude towards values, Obama is quite articulate as he asserts that “values are our inheritance, what makes us who we are as a people.... (They are) durable and ... constant across classes, and races, and faiths, and generation (pg69). He furthers this notion on the centrality of values by noting that

the broader question of shared values-the standards and principles that the majority of Americans deem important in their lives, and in the life of the country-should be the heart of our politics, the cornerstone of any meaningful debate about budgets and projects, regulations and policies (pg52).

The import of this is that values are a vital cog and the driving principle in the Americans' lives. For this very reason, they have to be demonstrated through deeds for “to do otherwise would be to relinquish our best selves” (pg 69).

Obama also strongly feels that Americans should demonstrate empathy which is one of his defining core values. As he notes, America suffers from “empathy deficit” (pg67) and hence should embrace that “... call to stand in somebody's shoes, and see through their eyes” (pg66). He is of the opinion that if only politicians could demonstrate empathy, then “... the balance of our current politics (would be tilted) in favour of those people who are struggling

in society” (pg67-8). Obama’s position on this issue is that Americans should have a sense of fellow feeling if at all the country is to progressively move on. This is why he makes the important observation that “and it’s safe to assume that those in power would think longer and harder about launching a war if they envisioned their own sons and daughters in harm’s way (pg67).

In his discussion of the constitution, Obama concludes that “no law is ever final ...” (pg76). His position is that it should not be definitive and inflexible. After all, “ ... laws are just words on a page- words that are sometimes malleable, opaque, as dependent on context and trust as they are in a story or poem...”(pg 77). He therefore proposes that it be recognised that the law is just a guideline which should give Americans a sense of direction. Obama also pronounces that “what is needed in the reading of the constitution is the spirit of compromise, modesty, exercise debate and competition “(pg95). Emphasis here is on the need to acknowledge that the constitution “.... is not static but rather a living document, and must be read in the context of an ever-changing world” (pg90).

On opportunity, Obama categorically states that the young and vulnerable should be given access to opportunities. He further contends that it is government’s responsibility to create those opportunities which is why he argues that America should invest in education, science and technology and energy independence.

As far as religion is concerned, his posture is that tolerance should be practised as a way of acknowledging religious diversity. This is why he posits that “....any reconciliation between faith and democratic pluralism requires some sense of proportion” (pg220). He also notes that it is prudent for progressive Americans to “.... tap into the moral underpinning of the nation” (pg214) rather than antagonise and persecute religious adherents. There is absolutely nothing

wrong with religion for as long as people realise that it should not substitute critical thinking which is why he argues that it should be grounded in struggle.

Obama remains critical but fair-minded in terms of his exploration of racial relations in America. His racial views are not jaundiced. Rather, they are a result of careful reflection. Obama notes that significant strides have been made towards ameliorating racial tensions but then he is quick to emphasise that America has not yet reached that “post racial politics” (pg232) stage because imbalances still remain visible. As he pronounces, “better isn’t enough” (pg 233). On the hand, he attacks blacks who do not want to acknowledge that there has change because this smacks of dishonouring “those who struggled on our behalf (and) robs us of our agency to complete the work they began” (pg233). Obama asserts that

To think clearly about race, then, requires us to see the world on a split screen-to maintain in our sights the kind of America that we want while looking squarely at America as it is ... (pg 233).

This, to him can go a long way towards achieving total racial harmony. His take therefore is that America should “.... complete the unfinished business of the civil rights movement- namely enforcing non-discrimination laws in such basic areas as employment, housing and education” (pg243), something which under recent Administrations “... has been tepid at best and under the current Administration, it has been essentially nonexistent” (pg 243).

In his analysis of “The World beyond our Borders,” Obama makes his opinions known on the United States foreign policy. To him, how to deal with “the world beyond our borders” is of utmost importance to the United States but then the United States has at times bungled it. Its inability to react in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the twin towers as well as its rash

decision to invade Iraq are used as ample evidence to corroborate that something is rotten in the United States foreign policy. As he bitterly notes, after the 9/11 attacks

I waited for .... the enunciation of a U.S foreign policy for the twenty-first century, one that would not only adapt our military planning intelligence operations, and homeland defenses to the threat of terrorist networks but build a new international consensus around the challenges of transnational threat (pg 292).

Unfortunately, as he notes, the wait is in vain for “this new blueprint never arrived.” (pg292). If anything, what the Americans got was “.... an assortment of outdated policies from eras gone by, dusted off, slapped together, and with new labels affixed (pg 292-3). In a way therefore, Obama is smearing mud on those in office, the Bush administration to be more precise, in order for him to clear a political space for himself. He lambasts Bush for America’s involvement in the war in Iraq. He is strident and unapologetic in asserting his position in that war as he asserts that

What I could not support was “a dumb war, a rash war, a war based not on reason but on passion, not on principle but on politics (pg294).

According to him therefore, what has to be done in terms of the United States foreign policy is simple: “if we want to make America more secure, we are going to have to have help make the world more secure (pg304).

At this juncture, it is imperative to underscore the point that all these and other issues have been extensively explored by Obama in a bid to appeal to a broad spectrum of American society, be they Democrats, Republicans, Christians, Moslems, independents, skeptics,

immigrants, workers, gays or lesbians. What this present researcher wants to read into Obama's exploration of these issues are the subtle scaffolding acts in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006). The picture of Obama that emerges is that of a broad-minded American who can help alleviate the American people's problems.

Through his narrative, he has endeavoured to establish firm yet flexible positions that will enable him to get on his way to the White House. Through narrative, as Javangwe (2011:12) notes "the narrator exercises authority over the subject matter,...authorizing interpretations and preferred views..." Obama has tried to, in Olney's (1972:35) words, create a "monument of the self". His narrative has elevated him to an enormously strategic position. As Porter (2011) notes, we are who we say we are. Thus, Obama has depicted himself as an American with a great political appeal and is at once ready to uplift his fellow Americans.

### **3.3 The Anecdotal Impact and Little Acts of Scaffolding in *The Audacity Of Hope***

In a bid to establish common ground with and get across to every American, Obama injects the anecdotal within the framework of his policy positions in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006). These anecdotes give the text its autobiographical touch or flavour. In a way, Obama deploys the authority of personal experience- that which is not at one remove from the world as we know it, but is concrete and real- in order to both appeal to the American people as well as to corroborate policy positions. The anecdotes have a massive impact in the text in that they are used as a prop to Obama's spruced up political image. They aid him in cementing his political convictions.

For instance, the story of Obama's visit to Kenya with his wife Michelle is deliberately projected in such a way that it proves the lack of freedom of the Kenyan people and by extension people the world over. This then enables him to appeal to the Americans to put into practice Thomas Jefferson's call for freedom.

Stories of his interaction with President Bush and Senator Byrd are essentially meant to scaffold his political image as both men kind of anoint him. President Bush for instance acknowledges his political qualities and the trajectory that his political life has taken when he "matter-of-factly" tells him that "you have got a bright future, very bright..." (pg 46-7). Obama is also admired for his political astuteness by no less august a personality than the renowned and revered Senator Byrd who takes him as a serious game-changer and potential success story. As Obama records his exchange with Senator Byrd, he remarks that "he told me I would do well in the senate but I shouldn't be too much of a rush..." (pg 100). These positive qualities that are always recognised in him bespeak of scaffolding acts. Everything seems to be happening for him as if to imply that they are following a pre-ordained order. In this respect, therefore, Obama is projecting himself as a rare political species indeed.

The story that Obama tells about his upbringing under an environment which was generally not religion-inclined and his later conversion is meant to bolster his position on religion that both non-believers and believers can be good, each in their own way. For instance, he chronicles that his mother who was non-religious instilled in him

the values that many Americans learn in Sunday school: honesty, empathy, discipline, delayed gratification, and hard work. She raged at poverty and injustice, and scorned those who were indifferent to both (pg 205)



What this essentially means is that even non-religious individuals can possess a "... fundamental faith –in the goodness of people "(pg 205). This is why Obama declares that "it was in search of confirmation of (those) values that I studied political philosophy. On the other hand, Obama notes that faith is "...an active palpable agent in the world "(pg 207) for as long as it is grounded in struggle and does" ...not require me to suspend critical thinking, disengage from the battle for economic and social justice..." (pg 208).

The point here therefore is that faith or lack of it thereof, should not be fundamentally divisive in America. He observes that "whatever we once were, we are no longer just a Christian nation, we are also a Jewish nation, a Muslim nation a Buddhist nation, a Hindu nation, and a nation of non-believers" (pg218). The story of his own life has therefore been deployed to illustrate this fact of religious diversity which has to be tolerated.

The story of the occasion of Rosa Parks' passing on with which he frames his analysis of race serves to illustrate the past and present state of racial relations in America. It also serves to demonstrate his position that while racial relations have improved, more still needs to be done if America is to move forward.

Obama also interpolates his experiences in Indonesia within the text in order to comprehensively discuss America's dealings with the world beyond its borders. As he observes,

In many ways, Indonesia serves as a useful metaphor for the world beyond our borders—a world in which globalization and sectarianism, poverty and

plenty, modernity and antiquity constantly collide (pg 279).

What this means therefore is that he analyses issues from the vantage point of someone who has been there and has experienced it firsthand. This will enable him to articulate a robust response, in the form of foreign policy, to the prevailing state of affairs beyond American borders.

Obama lastly uses the story of his own family as a way of trying to highlight his stance on the family concept in America. He recounts the difficulties that he and Mitchell have had to go through because both of them are working parents. He therefore pronounces that Americans should just try and strike a balance between family and work in order for the American family which is said to be on the decline to be stabilised. He narrates the story of his own upbringing which was quite conspicuous because of the absence of “a real” father figure and hence his reliance on women alone to mould him. He says that “it was women... who provided the ballast in my life, my grandmother... and my mother. From them I would absorb the values that guide me to this day” (pg 346). The male figures in his life who are all conspicuous for the wrong reasons including his “... father’s irresponsibility towards his children, my stepfather’s remoteness, and my grandfather’s failures” (pg 346) make him resolve that “my own children would have a father they could count on” (pg 346).

In a way, Obama is asserting the centrality of stable families which is why he opines that “.... policies that strengthen marriage.... are sensible goals to pursue” (pg 334) though he is quick to point out that government shouldn’t enforce “...sexual morality” (pg 335).

As has been explored in this section, Obama has deployed the anecdotal so as to cement his stance on specific issues. It has also been argued that through appealing to the anecdotal, Obama is in a way scaffolding his image as that kind of politician who has seen it all and hence is speaking from a well-informed perspective. He is not dealing with metaphors but with the concrete and real.

### **3.4 Entrenching the Self**

In this section *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) can be read as a way in which Obama has entrenched himself at the heart of American politics with his gaze inevitably being at the White House. To achieve his ambition, he begins by identifying with the struggles of the disenfranchised Americans. However, as he observes, “it wasn’t just the struggles of these men and women that had moved me. Rather, it was their determination, their self reliance, a relentless optimism in the face of hardship “(pg356). This quality of the Americans brings to his mind “a phrase that (his) pastor, Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. had once used in a sermon. The Audacity of hope” (pg 356), a phrase which in turn is used as the title of his book. As he asserts,

That was the best of the American spirit...having the audacity to believe despite all the evidence to the contrary that we could restore a sense of community to a nation torn by conflict, the gall to believe that despite personal setbacks....we had some control –and therefore responsibility- over our own fate “ (pg 356).

Obama thus wants to tap into this spirit which unites Americans so that he can be the ultimate political reference in America. As he notes,

It was that audacity ....that joined us as one people. It was that pervasive spirit of hope that tied my own family's story to the larger American story, and my own story to those of the voters I sought to represent. (pg 356)

Indirectly, Obama is announcing his candidature for the United States presidency which is why he declares that “ after all, I got into politics to have some influence on the public debate, because I thought I had something to say about the direction we need to go as a country” (pg359). He presents himself as the kind of politician who will not be satisfied until he knows that

in some demonstrable way I've been able to help people live their lives with some measure of dignity....being useful to my family and the people who elected me, leaving behind a legacy that will make our children's lives more hopeful than our own (pg361).

This in a very significant way is an oblique declaration of candidature. He wants to be involved in the reconstruction of America as the text ends with a very powerful statement: “it is that process that I wish to be a part of” (pg362) in reference to the reclaiming of the American dream. Obama, thus, has placed himself at the centre of American politics, “...a path I have chosen for myself...” (pg 360) especially after having glimpsed “...where it may lead, for good and for ill” (pg360). It is indeed a bold statement of intent but coming as it does from someone who has the audacity to hope for the best, it is not surprising at all.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to explore Obama's attitude towards different values in relation to what has to be done if America is to be progressive. It also explored the impact of the anecdotal and scaffolding acts in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006). The chapter concluded with the assertion that Obama has entrenched himself firmly at the heart of American politics with his ultimate objective being to be at the helm of the United States of America. Through analysing Obama's speaking positions, the chapter has forwarded that the text is the branding of Obama as one gets the impression that there is a spruced up image of the man so that he can fulfill his political ambitions.

## CHAPTER 4

### Galvanising The Electorate and Consolidating Political Gains in *Change We Can Believe*

#### *In: Barack Obama's Plan To Renew America's Promise*

#### 4.0 Introduction

The previous chapter analysed Obama's *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) as a treatise which is especially meant to spruce up his political image. It explored Obama's attitude towards the American value system, established his speaking positions and explored the impact of the anecdotal in the text. It then concluded with the assertion that Obama has obliquely but firmly embedded himself at the heart of American politics. He has established a foothold on the American political landscape courtesy of his self-branding.

This current chapter builds on that position that Obama has established a unique political identity for himself and furthers the thread of political visibility that Obama has established for himself. The chapter forwards the argument that if in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) Obama has stopped short of or deliberately skirted the pronouncement of his presidential candidacy, in *Change We Can Believe In* (2008) he, in strident fashion, pronounces that he wants to be the next President of the United States. He declares that "... I stand before you to announce my candidacy for President of the United States" (pg205). Whereas his narrative in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) has been tentative and suggestive of his presidential aspirations, in *Change We Can Believe In* (2008), he takes a clear and precise position. He has camped in the American political discourse-tents and everything-which is why he is running "... for the highest office in the land" (pg 237). He asserts that "I recognize that there is a certain presumptuousness – a certain audacity- to this announcement. I know I haven't spent a lot of time learning about the ways of Washington. But I have been there long enough to know that the ways of Washington must change" (pg205).

It is in light of his presidential aspirations that *Change We Can Believe In* (2008) is going to be read as Obama's strategy to get to the pinnacle of power in the United States. His starting point therefore, inevitably becomes the galvanizing of the electorate. He enlightens and conscientises them in order for him to consolidate his political leverage. As Obama himself notes,

... I went to the law school, because I wanted to understand how the law should work for those in need. I became a civil rights lawyer and taught constitutional law, and after a time, I came to understand that our cherished rights of liberty and equality depend on the active participation of an awakened electorate. It was with these ideas in my mind that I arrived in this capital as a State Senator (pg204).

The import of this contention is that Obama is aware that his success depends on the electorate. Much as he would want to pave the way to the White House for himself and in the process consolidate his political identity, he can only do it in the context of external reality (Giddens, 1991). This point is furthered by Porter (2011:121) when he forwards the argument that "... we are products of determinative forces that... condition not only our lives but our sense of self..."

Just as is the case with *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), *Change We Can Believe In* (2008) is not doctrinaire *autobiography*. As such, its analysis will also be informed by Olney's (1972) assertion that an autobiography is a product of man's creative impulse and, as such, the form it takes at any given time is unpredictable as well as Berryman's (1999:72) contention that autobiography refers to "the many different accounts that authors make of their experiences". The analysis of the text is also expected to benefit immensely from theories of

narratology which essentially deals with the less than innocent act of narration. It will be argued in fact that narrative is deliberately deployed for purposes of scaffolding the identity of the self.

#### **4.1 Paving the Way for Self Embedding**

Divided into two parts comprising “The Plan” and “The Call”, *Change We Can Believe In* (2008) is Barack Obama’s election manifesto which propels him into the oval office. It touches on a number of issues that Obama discusses in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) and outlines the plan he has to revamp American government which is in a state of decay. It also contains a number of his election campaign speeches and ends with his inaugural address as the President of the United States of America, a befitting finale for someone who has worked tirelessly to create a political identity for himself.

This section will analyse *Change We Can Believe In* (2008) as a means by which Obama has endeavoured to pave the way for himself to realise his Presidential ambitions. He succeeds in doing so through directing large doses of criticism at George Bush and his Administration for their ineptness and retrogressive inclinations. As Javangwe (2011) would have it, it is a clearing of spaces to allow for the embedding of the self. Javangwe (2011:64) furthers this notion by contending that “ideological spaces are bitterly contested in any given context as these entitle one to claims of not only belonging, but also of defining ones identity”. As Primorac (2006:59) notes, space is not merely “an objective physical surface with fixed characteristics upon which social categories are mapped out but both as social product and shaping force”. The import of this contention is that space is physical and ideological or discursive. This bodes well for purposes of this chapter because Obama deems Bush his ideological rival and he wants to inhabit the space that Bush currently occupies.



Not surprising therefore, mudslinging pervades *Change We Can Believe In* (2008) as Obama catalogues a number of critical areas where the government has bungled it. These include inter alia, the economy, education, health care, employment, security, energy, infrastructure and democracy. There is an incessant resonance of the government's failure in the past eight years. As Obama sums it up, "the past eight years have been a failure of America leadership ..." (pg17). Indeed "these past eight years will be remembered for misguided policies, missed opportunities, and a rigid and ideological adherence to discredited ideas" (pg16, 257). It is precisely for this reason that he feels vindicated in launching a broadside at the Bush Administration which "instead of reaching for new horizons ... has put us in a hole" (pg258).

Obama heaps all American problems on the doorstep of those occupying the white House as he observes that "... the real struggle being waged in American homes and workplaces today is a consequence of tired and misguided economic policies in Washington" (pg19). To him, the leadership exhibits a smallness of politics, is distracted by the petty and the trivial and avoids taking tough decisions which can enable Americans to tackle big problems. What Obama is doing here is very deliberate. He smears mud on them and in the process clears the space for his entry into the Oval Office.

The economic quagmire that America finds itself in is a culmination of "... a tired and misguided philosophy that has dominated Washington for far too long" (pg35). It is indeed the Bush Administration which is causing "... the dream of boundless opportunity that should be the right of all Americans (to slip) away" (pg19). The Bush Administration has a myopic economic vision since its policies are flawed. It is also blind to the global economic changes that are unfolding before its very eyes as Obama charges that "as our world and economy have changed, the thinking in Washington has not kept pace with the tests of the twenty-first century" (pg16). It also lacks the audacity to "... challenge conventional thinking and worn ideas" (pg16). What all this means is that the current leadership is mired in some kind of

stasis and all they are adept at is “.... looking back for solutions (from) different eras” (pg20) which is invariably inadequate “... to meet today’s challenges (pg20).

Obama is strident and unapologetic in pronouncing his frustration with the Bush Administration which is ill-equipped to deal with competition coming from different quarters. As he observes, “... in the face of competition, Washington has stood still-and in some cases, even moved backward ...” (pg34). He also cannot forgive Bush for having embraced “.....the discredited philosophy of trickle –down economics” (pg35) which runs contrary to the aspirations of ordinary Americans. These policies “... protect special interests and the privileged few and ignore the working families that are America’s backbone and the engine of our economic growth” (pg33). The state of affairs is so objectionable that Obama finds it necessary to offer his biting criticism. The economic policy espoused by Bush is “... out of balance and out of step with this defining moment” (pg141) precisely for the reason that it privileges the interests of the wealthy and well- connected. This inevitably frustrates the promised prospects of upward mobility for “... hardworking families” (pg39).

Overall, Bush has ignored the rules of the road and “.... we have seen a dangerous erosion of the principles that have allowed our economy to thrive” (pg58). As a result, America has been plunged into a morass of debt which in turn has curtailed the growth of the economy. He stridently attacks,” this has been the most fiscally irresponsible Administration in American History” (pg59). Emphasis here is on the fact that Bush has steered a government that is economically unbelievably inefficient. His heroic failure to handle and shepherd the economy in the right direction is reason enough for the electorate to oust him from the Oval Office.

According to Obama, the Bush Administration has also bungled it on the security front. The 9\11 attacks have demonstrated the leadership’s lack of vigilance, alertness and preparedness

to "...prevent and respond to a major terrorist attack or other catastrophe" (pg121). Obama forwards the position that"... the Bush- Cheney Administration offered a twentieth century response to this twenty-first century problem and gave the terrorists the battle they want us to fight: a misguided invasion of Iraq..." (pg113). They "played politics with the terrorist threat" (pg114) and what even galls Obama more is that"...seven years after nearly three thousand Americans were killed on our soil, the terrorists who attacked on 9/11 are still at large" (pg115). Thus, to a large extent Bush has misfired on the security front since it is too lax and therefore heavily compromised.

Bush has also done very little in terms of health care, education and employment creation. While it is clear that health care is in a sorry state, Bush, just like the other presidential candidates "... who have made promises about fixing health care and cutting costs..." "does virtually nothing about it, because "... big drug and insurance companies use their deep pockets and clout to block reform "(pg47). The same applies to the education sector which is not given the serious attention that it deserves as manifested by the staggering levels of education deficit which is very apparent in America. To Obama, Bush does not demonstrate any commitment to this highly critical sector. As for employment, statistics on the ground are shocking because under Bush"... America has lost 3.7 million manufacturing jobs" (pg99). This demonstrates that Bush's economic policies lack the capacity to generate employment.

Bush is also attacked for his ineffective approach to solving the country's energy problems. He, like

Every single President since Richard Nixon has promised to do  
something to strengthen our energy independence and curb our

use of the middle East oil and other fossil fuels, but we are more dependent on it than ever before (pg69).

This state of affairs is, to Obama, unacceptable as he charges that “we can no longer afford Washington’s paralysis on this critical issue” (pg69). The same goes for Bush’s “--- lack of investment and strategic long term planning” (pg93) which has contributed to infrastructure decay. Obama also charges that Bush has failed to champion democracy because the evidence on the ground is that “over the past eight years, the long legacy of the United States standing up for democracy and human rights has been tarnished” (pg147). In fact, civil rights have been trampled under foot by the Bush Administration especially through the politicization of Department of justice.

Pertinent to observe in all these attacks that are directed at George Bush is the fact that the self is trying to create a political space for it to inhabit. The centrality of narrative therefore has to be emphasised here as it plays an instrumental role in the scaffolding of agency (Coullie et al, 2006). As Javangwe (2011:45) explains, “What this means is that potential futures of our selves are imagined through the different images we create and stories we tell about our past and our present selves. Autobiography of necessity attends to the question “who do I want to become?” Thus, Obama is eloquently answering this question through the deployment of narrative which deliberately tarnishes the image of his political adversaries. He is engaged in an exercise in political contestation as he fights for his own political space.

As Anderson (1991) observes, autobiographies are written “uptime” and depend on the past to explain the present through the process of selective remembering. This selection is what we see being engaged in by Obama in his narrative. He deliberately selects everything that is

bad that Bush has done and, by implication, he is sprucing up his own image. In fact, as Onega and Landa (1996) have it, there is always a representation to any narrative and because it is a representation, the act of narration privileges certain points of view which in this case is Obama's desire to get into the highest political office in the land.

Obama through narrative has endeavoured to clear space for his self-embedding. He has refused to sup with the devil, to wine and dine with the Bush Administration which is irresponsible. The Bush Administration has been, at least to Obama, as bush as his name implies. This therefore necessitates the need for Obama to pronounce the "change we can believe in."

#### **4.2 Root and Branch Cure: The Panacea to America's ills**

Having cleared the space for self-entrenchment, Obama then outlines what he has in store for the American people. It is in view of this fact that this section will forward the argument that Obama wants to adopt a weed and seed (pg190) approach to America's problems. What this initiative essentially means is that all that which has been done by the Bush Administration is discredited and discarded and in their place seeds that allow for the growth of a better America will be planted. It is more a question of replacing an outdated mindset with a new, dynamic, determined and innovative government (pg68). His will be a "... new leadership for a changing world" (pg 197).

In *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) Obama states that "...my treatment of issues is often partial and incomplete. I offer no unifying theory of American government, nor... provide a manifesto for action, complete with charts and graphs, timetables and ten-point plans" (pg9). This is the position that he radically departs from in *Change We Can Believe In* (2008) which is his manifesto and, as such, provides the roadmap that American government should follow. He comprehensively outlines what he will do once in office. His ultimate objective is to

effect changes which are tangible and meaningful. As he declares "... the purpose of this book is to describe in detail what that change would look like" (pg7).

Virtually everything that Bush does administratively is objectionable to Obama and hence the need to overhaul the whole system. As Obama pronounces,"It falls to us to shape a new century. Every aspect of government should be under review. We can ill-afford needless layers of bureaucracy and outmoded programs" (pg268)

What this essentially means is that, through narrative, Obama is projecting himself as a visionary, a politician with clear-eyed policies that can turn America around. This of course is an act of scaffolding one's identity and narratives always have the capacity to do that. Obama proposes taking on board rigorous and radical reforms which are a complete departure from what the current administration has been doing. As he announces, he will launch the most sweeping ethics and reform in history to "make the White House the people's house" (pg18).

In terms of the economy, which has almost been brought to its knees, Obama proposes that a holistic approach be adopted to revive it. It should be made to grow so that it advances opportunities for all Americans. His strategy is to ensure that the American economy be moved forward "...and keeps us at the cutting edge in the global economy...create jobs and drive up wages and incomes" (pg35). Obama's approach runs contrary to Bush's "trickle down economics" which favours the wealthy and well-connected. He embraces a bottom-top growth that empowers "hardworking American families" (pg33) and promotes the growth of the middle class.

The education, health, energy and infrastructure development sectors which have all been hard hit by the skewed policies in Washington also need to be revamped. This is critical as Obama notes,

A revamped education system. A bold new energy strategy. A more efficient health care system. Renewed investment in basic research and our infrastructure. These are the pillars of a more competitive economy that will take advantage of the global marketplace's opportunity (pg266).

All these are critical sectors and they have been literally bleeding under the current administration which is why he feels it imperative to inject new life into them. As far as education is concerned, Obama declares that "as president, (he) will make a historic commitment to our children's education" (pg52).

On the issue of security which by all standards is currently too lax and compromised, Obama's strategy is that he will ensure that the American security system is foolproof. This is why he posits that he has "... a detailed plan to bring opportunity and security to all Americans" (pg27). Obama clearly articulates that as President, he

will turn the page on the failed ideology and tired thinking of the past and offer a tough, smart and principled national security that uses all elements of America power-military, diplomatic and economic to protect our nation (pg110).

Obama's strategy is also to ensure that the United States military strategy is fine-tuned to meet the unforeseen challenges of the twenty-first century, especially terrorism. His targets are to end the war in Iraq, invent new military capabilities to fight terrorism, stop the spread of nuclear weapons and finish with Bin Laden, Al Qaeda and the Taliban. All these are serious

challenges that the American people are facing and hence he proposes introducing changes that the American people can believe in.

Obama also intends to help those struggling throughout the world to achieve freedom because “In this new century the security and well-being of each and every American is tied to the security and well-being of those who live beyond our borders” (pg139).

Unlike the Bush Administration which is “... increasingly removed from its people and dominated by special interests (pg153), Obama will strive to create “... a government of the people, by the people and for the people” (pg285). This is why he insists that he will not go it alone in this political game. Rather, he says”....each of us in our own lives will have to accept responsibility” (pg206) and work together for a better America.

Over and above everything else, Obama’s strategy is such that “he will restore honest, transparent government ...” (pg59). Openness and accountability is what he will introduce in government (pg154) in order to ensure that “Washington’s business is the people’s business” (pg18). He also advances the point that he will ensure that government is not used to forward personal interests. Neither is it acceptable to be partisan when recruiting government employees. Obama asserts that he will “... lead an Administration that will make sure its numbers add up and the result will be economic growth and prosperity for all Americans” (pg59). In the same vein, he will promote innovation, trade and reform that will create jobs and prosperity for all Americans. He declares that he would rather let people hear what has to be known than tell them what they want to hear (pg214) which is why at times he will be obliged to crack the whip or use the “bully pulpit” in order to get the job done.

What all these pronouncements by Obama in terms of what he will do to turn America around mean is that the self is seeking personal justification (Gusdorf, 2001) and relevance in the scheme of things in America. As Bourdieu (2000:300) notes, there is in autobiographical



narrative an “inclination toward making oneself the ideologist of one’s own life, through the selection of a few significant events with a view to elucidating an overall purpose,” which purpose at this point is Obama’s presidential aspirations.

As Gusdorf (2001) notes, narration involves the imposing of world views. We see this being negotiated by Obama in *Change We Can Believe In* (2008) as he is bent on making everyone else see things the way he sees them. This point is furthered by Javangwe (2011:12-13) when he posits that “the narrator exercises authority over the subject matter, scaffolding his own image, authorizing ... interpretations and preferred views through the process of narration.”

By projecting himself as endowed with the capacity to bring about change in America, Obama has, through narrative, placed himself on a high political pedestal such that his political identity becomes quite conspicuous.

### **4.3. Spin-Doctors and trump Card Deployment**

Having galvanized the American electorate through enlightening them on the nature and cause of their problems and having unpacked the solutions he has to the American people’s problems, this section forwards the argument that Obama deploys spin-doctors and his trump card in order to have an octopus grip on his political gains.

In a bid to entrench itself the self can use any means available to it so that it can project itself in as favourable a light as possible. In fact, as Giddens (1991) notes, self-construction happens in the context of external reality. This is precisely what we see here as Obama has deployed spin-doctors in order to enhance his political image. Obama frames each of his strategies or plans to renew the American promise with comments made by some of America’s best minds including Chief Executive Officers, authors, Admirals and high-ranking government officials all of whom endorse his candidacy. For purposes of

clarification, it would help to make reference to some of the comments made by these distinguished Americans but it is also important to underscore the point that all the comments made are positive.

For instance, Warren Buffet, a distinguished Chief Executive Officer, says that “I believe that Barack Obama has the right understanding and right vision for where we need to go as a country...” (pg31-32). These are very significant comments but perhaps it is Admiral John Nathman of the United States Navy whose comments are most insightful. He comments that

The qualities of an individual that allow him or her to lead can include, experience and Senator Obama has served admirably on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. But the most important qualities of a good leader are integrity, character and judgement. These are the qualities we need in our next President...Senator Barack Obama is a leader. He will lead America well (pg 107).

Implied in both these statements is that Obama is the ultimate presidential candidate in the United States at the moment. To add gloss to this rather favourable image of Obama, Lee Hamilton, Vice Chairman of the 9/11 Commission declares that

Barack Obama’s foreign policy is pragmatic, visionary and tough. He will work with our friends and allies. Barack Obama will strengthen our ability to use all the tools of American power and relentlessly promote the American values of freedom and justice for all people (pg108).

All these and other comments are illustrative of an audacious attempt at forging a spruced up identity of the self. The placement of the comments is quite strategic since they are meant to scaffold the identity of the narrator. If the best American minds have spoken, then the lesser mortals have every reason to be swayed. This implicates the text in the politics of narration as has been highlighted before. This is especially so given that Obama deliberately selects those comments which can only enhance his political image. As Javangwe (2011:13) posits, “the self becomes its own diplomat, projecting spruced up self images and burying those that are deemed undesirable.” This also confirms White’s (1987 :) assertion that no narrative is ever full and complete because of the process of selection.

In his campaign, Obama also deploys his trump card “E Pluribus Unum” which translated means “Out of many, one” as his first line of defence. It is indeed his rallying point which largely helps him checkmate his political adversaries. Explained in clearer terms, Obama’s trump card is his fervent belief in the unity which should characterise the American people at this very critical moment in history. As he robustly pronounces,

Leading America at this critical moment in history requires more than policies and ideas. To meet our challenges, we must summon our common faith in common values—the sense of who we are as a people, the common beliefs that bind us together, the spirit of patriotism that that bridges divisions of partisanship and ideology (pg153).

This sums up the essence of what Obama’s trump card entails. He does not keep it close to his chest but rather wears it on his sleeves because he is strongly convinced of its potency. As he pronounces, “the only way to bring about the future we seek is if we are willing to work together as one nation and one people” (pg7). He also asserts that the American people want

“... a politics that brings people together across party lines to work for a common good” (pg15).

As Obama observes, the American people are tired of partisan politics which is why he pronounces that “... ordinary citizens, Democrats, Republicans and Independents-are ready to unite in the cause of renewing America’s promise” (pg196). What they need therefore is a “... leader who can unite us around the principles that we share and rally us to common purpose” (pg196). This concept of unity that he calls for is embodied in America’s “patchwork heritage” (pg296) as well as Obama’s own dual racial heritage whose story “... has seared into my genetic make-up the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts-that out of many, we are truly one” (pg227).

Obama concentrates a great deal on the folly of being divided as he is strongly convinced that “we are one people” (pg213), this despite the fact that “our stories are singular (because) our destiny is shared (pg287). As far as he knows, American people are connected by “... common challenges and common hopes” (pg18), challenges and hopes which are neither black nor white, Democratic nor Republican, “... or Latino or Asian, but rather problems that confront us all” (pg229). Even in terms of world affairs, Obama stresses the importance of unity. In his address in Berlin for instance, he asserts that “... we cannot afford to be divided. No one nation, no matter how powerful, can defeat... challenges alone” (pg275). It is only appropriate therefore that on his declaration of candidacy, Obama makes reference to his trump card. He declares

That is why in the shadow of the Old State Capitol where Lincoln once  
called on a divided house to stand together where common hopes and  
dreams still live, I stand before you to announce my candidacy for

President of the United States (pg205).

Once that spirit of oneness is invoked, appealed to and embraced, then, as Obama puts it, "... our country responds" (pg18). The American people are guided by this "belief in the power we have if we all work together, a fidelity to the history we share and an indomitable spirit that always believes: yes we can" (pg197). This is exactly what happens as Obama resoundingly wins the election.

Obama's deployment of his trump card is as fascinating as his deployment of spin-doctors because it is also mired in the arithmetic of narration. In fact, it is a deliberate attempt to create a unique identity that transcends party loyalties for the self. It is a manoeuvre that is meant to outwit his political opponents. It is an identity that he is enabled to craft for himself by the intrinsic aspects of narrative which is usually deployed to scaffold the identity of the self. He has placed himself at the centre of American politics through the deployment of narrative which spruces up his own image. This self-propelling confirms Smith and Watson's (2001:42) contention that "human beings are agents or actors in their own lives..." Thus, Obama has been an active agent in the creation of his own identities.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has analysed *Change We Can Believe In* (2008) as Obama's strategy for galvanizing the electorate and consolidating political gains. It explored how Obama clears space for himself by launching a broadside at the Bush Administration. The chapter also explored the panacea that Obama has to America's ills. The chapter concluded with an analysis of how Obama has gained access to the White House through the deployment of spin-doctors and his trump card- unity among Americans. The chapter had a preoccupation with the centrality of narrative in the creation of Obama's identities- the objective being to entrench the subject narrator at the heart of American politics. This precisely what happens as

at the end Obama has, to a certain extent, a clearly defined political identity as he is the ultimate political reference in Washington.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Conclusion**

This dissertation's thrust was to explore how Obama constructs his self-identities. Given that the study set out to trace Obama's ascendancy to power, it established the position that Obama's three texts under study are politically motivated. The point of departure for the research was that in the late modern epoch, individuals construct their own identities. This of course confirms Giddens' (1991) contention that in the late modern epoch identity is a personal project over which the self is responsible. It was emphasised that there is a pluralistic sense of the identity of individuals in the late modern epoch (Smith and Watson, 2001, Hall, 1991) and hence the notion of Obama's selves which was advanced.

The dissertation also noted that while the self has enormous agency to create acts of self-fashioning, that can only happen in the context of external reality (Giddens, 1991, Porter, 2011). This is precisely for the reason that individuals contribute to and are impacted on by the collective.

Because the research focused on the construction of identities from an autobiographical perspective, the politics of narration was grappled with. This was necessitated by the fact that autobiography, which is defined by Smith and Watson (2001) and Berryman (1999) as self life writing, while it attempts at truth-telling, has a propensity for promoting certain desirable images of the subject narrator. In other words, the research found it necessary to implicate Obama's texts in the politics of narration. The three texts were read as deliberate attempts by the subject narrator to create desired identities for the self. Thus, it was argued for the greater part of the research that Obama spruces up his image in order to achieve a political end. This sprucing up of his image enables him to become the first black United States of America President.

Chapter One of the dissertation provided the introduction. It began by casting the background to study. This was meant to try and provide a context in which to analyse Obama's texts as well as to situate Obama within a specific cultural context. This observation was vital because it was in line with Gusdorf's (2001) contention that an autobiography is not produced in a vacuum. Rather, it is produced within a given cultural matrix. In this case, the study established that Obama's autobiographies which are the vehicles through which he constructs his self-identities are located within the African-American writing tradition. This point was considered critical in that it enabled the researcher to, to a certain extent at least, explore Obama's texts as narratives of race and class, even though it was largely acknowledged that the overarching concern in the texts is Obama's construction of his identities.

The chapter also reviewed related literature in a bid to further contextualise the area of study. In this respect, literature on autobiography as a genre was explored as well as the state of self and identity. While the areas were explored separately, it was submitted that there is a strong connection between the two since autobiography's provenance coincides with the notion of the understanding of the self as an autonomous entity (Olney, 1980).

On autobiography, Berryman's (1999) understanding of the genre as the various accounts that writers make of their experiences was taken as the starting point and indeed the bedrock for the analysis of Obama's texts especially *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (2006) and *Change We Can Believe In: Barrack Obama's Plan to Renew the American Promise* (2008) both of which are not orthodox autobiographies. In terms of its provenance, it was forwarded that autobiography is a modern epoch phenomenon (Giddens, 1991, Weintraub, 1978, Gusdorf, 2001). The centrality of autobiography in "fixing" one's image (Gusdorf, 2001, Olney, 1980) and as an "act of entrenchment" (Bruner, 2001:29) was explored.



The chapter then proceeded to review literature on self and identity. Basically, the research grappled with a range of scholarly debates about identity and self from the medieval times right up to the late modern epoch. It was then established that for purposes of the present study, the conception of the self and identity in the late modern dispensation would be the driving principle. In this respect, scholars such as Giddens' (1991), Hall (1996), Smith and Watson (2001) and Beck's (1992) reflexive definition of the self was taken on board to bolster an understanding of Obama's construction of his identities. These scholars all underscore the fluidity and multiplicity of an individual's identities in the late modern times.

The chapter also explored the theoretical framework that underpins the study. It principally aligned itself to postcolonial theories linked to identity formation because these embrace hybridity. Theories of narratology were also deemed critical to the study because they concentrate on the science of narrative (Onega and Landa, 1996). Narration itself is implicated in the politics of self life writing because writers always write with a specific end in mind. In this case, it was established that Obama writes his texts to promote his political agenda. In terms of methodology, the chapter underscored that the qualitative method would be used because it pluralizes rather than essentialize identities or any other life circumstance (Flick, 2002).

Chapter Two analysed *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995). The overarching argument in the chapter was that the text is an autobiographical project which symbolises the search for origins. It was argued that Obama tries to answer the question "who am I?" This implies that it is an identity that is negotiated for and arrived at at a self-reflexive level (Giddens, 1991). It was argued that Obama searches for bearings in order for him to establish the springboard from which to launch his political career. In other words, he has to first and foremost define who he is, which is why it was submitted that he authenticates and affirms his black identity at a self-reflexive level.

The chapter went further to explore how Obama initializes his search for a political identity in America. What was emphasised in this regard was Obama's involvement in organizing black folks in the black neighbourhoods in Chicago. This was read as a deliberate attempt at sowing the seeds of his political visibility. It was therefore only prudent for the research to align itself with the position that Obama in *Dreams From My Father* (1995) carves both black and political identities, thus in open confirmation of Hall (1996) and Smith and Watson's (2001) contention that individuals have multiple identities in the late modern epoch.

Chapter Three of the study focused on *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (2006). What was proffered in the chapter was that Obama tries to consolidate both the political and black identities that he has assumed in *Dreams From My Father* (1995) though one gets the impression that it is the political identity that is becoming more conspicuous. Read as an exploration of Obama's attitude towards the American value system, the text was considered an act of self-branding by Obama. This act of self-branding corroborates the fact that individuals construct their identities in the late modern epoch.

Because the identity indices that Obama assumes are tilted towards his political development, *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) was considered a voter-image friendly text. It was observed and submitted that in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) Obama seeks to create a unique identity of himself as some kind of a political saint. He tries as much as possible to spruce up his political image so that he achieves some relevance in the political dispensation in the United States of America. That is the reason why the speaking positions he adopts in the text are quite moderate and "rational." The objective is to appeal to a wide spectrum of the American people.

What was established in this chapter therefore was that there are subtle scaffolding acts by the self in order for the self to entrench itself. While it was noted that the language is slightly faint, tentative and suggestive of aspirations for a higher political office, it was also established that the text places Obama in political limelight, a point which was then developed in the following chapter.

Chapter Four of the study analysed *Change We Can Believe In* (2008). The text was read as an act of galvanising the electorate in order for the self to achieve its desired ends. In this respect, what was confirmed significantly was the fact that in a bid to construct the identity indices of the self, the self is always cognisant of the existence of eternal forces that help shape those identity indices.

The chapter advanced the argument that Obama constructs a positive image of himself in contradistinction to other politicians. He deliberately smears a lot of mud on the other politicians in order to create spaces for his own political entrenchment. Thus, George Bush's multiple shortcomings in terms of governance are exposed. This was read as an act of paving the way for the self to realise its goals which in this case is Obama's quest to become the President of the United States of America. By emphasising Bush's shortcomings, Obama is obliquely sprucing up his own image.

It was submitted in the chapter that Obama becomes politically overt in *Change We Can Believe In* (2008). Thus, his declaration of candidacy was read as such. His political identity is constructed in the context of external reality. His image is extensively scaffolded as he endows himself with the capacity to regularise the highly objectionable administrative state of affairs in the United States of America. It was therefore forwarded that Obama manages to get to the helm of the United States government through creating favourable images of the self.

In the final analysis, what the research established was the strong link that connects Obama's texts which, as previously stated, are all politically motivated. The texts trace the trajectory of Obama's political life from its infancy right up to the time he is in the Oval Office. What was also arrived at through tracing Obama's political life as captured in his life narratives was that individuals can construct their identities. Obama, it was observed, manages to construct his political and black identities. In this respect therefore, autobiography's centrality in affording agency to the self in terms of identity construction was emphasised. Indeed, Obama's ascendancy to power is a case of "self-made selves".

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