

Too Black or Not Black Enough? Obama's Policy on Race

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Abstract. As a biracial that has experienced the “melting pot” situation of Hawaii, Barack Obama deals with the difficulties of coexisting with black and whites and internalizing simultaneously both worlds’ languages and customs. Although in white eyes his white roots were invisible and for black critics and leaders he was not a pure African American who has experienced the racial segregation and Jim Crowism, Obama to unify the two contradictory worlds. Obama’s doctrine of race is based on unification and not separation. In his approach toward race, Obama believes that the secret of socioeconomic development in United States is not only the black and whites union but also the coalition of all ethnic groups including Latinos, Hispanics, and Asians. His policy in giving priority to economic improvements, Obama assumes, will pave the way toward a post racial society.

Keywords: Barack Obama, race, biraciality, blackness, whiteness, unification

1. Introduction

Barack Obama as a biracial is caught between the black and white worlds. Although he found his identity in black community, his white origin is something which cannot be overlooked. Obama in his autobiography *Dreams from My Father* attempts to show that how this reality has affected his view on race and black identity. According to an international point of view, “[Obama] seemed less provincial than the black conservatives telling their stories about the difficulties they faced adjusting to life at elite schools in the 1970s and 1980s because of the added pressure [he] felt from other black students to conform to a militant style of being black.” (Pinckney). Obama refused to be hostile to white Americans owing to the fact that he did not agree with the radical black nationalists who considered the whites as the only reason for all black miseries.

2. Biraciality and Race Politics

Obama’s biraciality caused a double problem regarding his race politics as in Lelyveld words “too black” for whites and “not enough black” for African Americans. On one side, although his skin color was enough for the common people like those who were living in Chicago South Side (Obama worked in this black residential area for three years as a community organizer) to accept him as an insider in black society, some of the black elite and critics like Gary Young had different idea. They believe that Obama is not black enough to be the spokesman of African Americans. Paul Street in his book *Barack Obama and the Future of American Politics* writes that Young has noted:

- Obama seems to have been handed to black America from Hawaii and Harvard and did not emerge from its racially segregated and disproportionately impoverished neighborhoods, schools, and churches. He arrived from outside and did so, some black Americans point out, with advantages produced by previous struggles launched from within black America—the great civil rights battles and victories of the 1950s and 1960s. (83).

Criticism of such, caused incertitude among the black leaders like Jesse Jackson as if Obama is truly the African Americans’ spokesman who is going to be the blacks’ defender. The reality that Obama has not experienced the black sufferings in America and the possibility that he might be a tool for whites to make

silent all the racial equality cries and struggles forever, opened the way for black nationalists like Rev. Jackson to launch their attacks on him. But in spite of the fact that Obama is a biracial and his father and his ancestors are Kenyan not African Americans and they did not experience the slavery and Jim Crowism, I am not agree with Young opinion since in contrast to other biracials (like Tiger Woods), he went on a self-discovery journey during his childhood and most of his youth period to find the ideals of blackness and raise on race consciousness and his black identity. During the time when he was in Indonesia his mother, Ann Dunham, used to give him English lessons every day for three hours to make him more aware of his legacy of both white Americans and African Americans:

- She would come home with books on the civil rights movement, the recordings of Mahalia Jackson, the speeches of Dr. King. When she told me stories of schoolchildren in the South who were forced to read books handed down from wealthier white schools but who went on to become doctors and lawyers and scientists, I felt chastened by my reluctance to wake up and study in the mornings [...] Every black man was Thurgood Marshall or Sidney Poitier; every black woman Fannie Lou Hamer or Lena Horne. To be black was to be the beneficiary of a great inheritance, a special destiny, glorious burdens that only we were strong enough to bear (Dreams 50-51).

All the figures that Obama studied about during his childhood are the successful African Americans being very famous for their brilliant social and political positions during the Civil Rights and Post-Civil Rights era. Thurgood Marshall, as an example was the civil rights activist and the first African American who became the member of the Supreme Court of the United States or Sidney Poitier who is well-known actor, director and also author since 1967 till now. The reason that Durham particularly focused on the black heroes is what Henrich and McElreath (2003) call it “Context Biases” in which during the cultural transmission stage, parents tend to convey those cultural concepts and beliefs that are favorable and related to the famous and successful figures within one’s heritage. Since his very early years of his life in a place far away from his original country Obama learned about his roots and the ideals of blackness. The above passage shows that being away from the cultural source does not mean ignorance and those childhood studies were his motivations to explore the identity he narrated in *Dreams from My Father*. Obama not only theoretically identified himself with African Americans but also practically followed the dreams of civil rights leader to improve the life condition of blacks in America by volunteer working as organizer in South Side Housing Project for three years and give them “that fervor about their lives that he saw them get from Harold Washington. He wanted them to get that feeling from him, the same feeling he got from them.” (Pinckney). (By reiterating the fact that his skin color as I said was enough to be considered an insider for Altged people). Obama through his life in Chicago South Side faced the underlying issue of racism. He “had become familiar with the lexicon of color consciousness within the black community □ good hair, bad hair; thick lip or thin; if you’re light, you’re all right, if you’re black, get back” (Dreams 193). Obama here underlined that he is aware of the racial binary opposition system in American society where all black matters are bad and all white matters are good. This familiarity is crucial in order to defend Obama against all the attacks toward him from those critics who believe he is dedicated to the black community and he is not aware of any racial discrimination African Americans suffered in the United States. In addition; Obama’s friends were mostly those who tried to make a connection between their identity and race and even as he said in “A More Perfect Union” speech in Philadelphia he decided to marry a black woman “who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave owners - an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters” (Obama 2008). So Obama did more than what is essentially necessary to be an ideal African American.

On the other hand, his white roots was not visible for the white people and it was like a passive part of Obama’s identity first, because of his colored skin and second, for the American society with a long history of racism, miscegenation was still not welcome especially when the father was black. As Obama stated “the word is humpbacked, ugly, portending a monstrous outcome: like antebellum or octoroon” (Dreams11). What white people admit about biracials and judge them immediately was their appearance. In *Dreams from My Father* Obama refers to this reality when he is going to attend college and his old white poet friend suggest him if he wants to get the admission the best thing to do is “Leaving your race at the door [...] Leaving your people behind.” (97). Leaving his race behind means to be apathetic to his black origins and all black nationalistic feelings and prejudices. Obama’s color of skin is the base of judgment in white American

eyes and an outstanding feature of racial difference so in order to do well as a biracial (mixture of black and white) in a culturally white dominant atmosphere of the college Obama must adopt and confirm to the white rules and values. This reality became Obama's central motif that if African Americans are in search of prosperity and success, the way pass through the white's territory, so the black and whites should work by and next to each other. All hard feelings, enmity, and above all separation should be displaced with cooperation and unification.

In such situation that there is a dilemma whether he is black enough or too black, Obama's stance is very crucial. Obama made connections with black community and black identity with regards to his white roots that he believes should never take it for granted since he is a biracial. In *Dreams* he writes: "I learned to slip back and forth between my black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and structures of meaning, convinced that with a bit of translation on my part the two worlds would eventually cohere." (82). The unification of both black and white provided the bases for realization of his dream, his father's dream and also Martin Luther King's. Accepting and trying to understand both black and white values in Obama's policy is the key point to end the gap between these two worlds and reduce the tensions, prejudices, and fear once and forever between the whites and the greatest minority ethnic group in the United States since the very beginning of its formation. However; Obama's biraciality caused him problems, but he skillfully used it as an advantage and represented himself "an embodiment of multi-ethnic inclusion when the country was becoming no longer white in its majority" (Remnick 32). Obama's doctrine in the role of a biracial is based on integration of all ethnic minorities as Hill in his book *The First Black President* notes that "Although Obama is grounded in the black experience, he was able nonetheless to build a multicultural coalition made up of blacks, whites, Latinos, Asians, and others to show that he had the vision and sensibilities to be their president." (37). Obama's strategy of unification is not limited only to the black and white society but it encompasses a wider range which includes all the minorities and different ethnic groups in the United States. Spending several years of his growing up stage in Hawaii as a multicultural place and also being a biracial prepared a good condition to feel deeply the needs and troubles of all races. He believes that all Americans including whites, blacks, Asians, Hispanic, etc. should assimilate for developments. As in his speech in Democratic National Convention in 2004 he quoted in *The Audacity of Hope*: "there is not a black America, and white America, and Latino America, and Asian America— there is the United States of America (231). Obama like Dr. King and many other Civil Right activists sees the future of minorities in general and African Americans specifically, in living peacefully alongside the whites within a non-hegemonic society.

There is no doubt that Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and many others were the "forerunner of Obama... [they], along with other freedom fighters of the Civil Rights Movement, opened the floodgates of opportunity and possibility in America by exposing the demons of American racism to itself" (Hill 24). Those activists paved the way for Obama and his generation and his presidency was a good occasion to see the legacy of Civil Rights Movement these days. But what I want to emphasis here is that what made Obama different in compare to the previous black leaders is his attitude toward race. Race and racism in his struggle for a better America for all Americans and in particular African Americans is not the most important and sole issue, but in fact Obama first and foremost is a politician.

In his strive to bring changes for African Americans specifically, Obama posed on the socioeconomic developments through politics. In *Dreams from My Father* he writes that "perhaps with more self-esteem fewer black would be poor, I thought to myself, but I had no doubt that poverty did nothing for our self-esteem. Give that black man some tangible skills and job. Teach that black child reading and arithmetic in a safe, well-funded school. With the basics taken care of, each of us could search for our own self-worth" (194). Obama outwardly gives priority first to the fundamental needs of African Americans and he believes that black self-esteem and black power are necessary but not sufficient factors in order to solve all the black troubles.

As I asserted above for Obama Politics is the "cure for all ills" but the question here is that how is his strategy toward race? Does race have any position in his campaign? I think Steel answers the question correctly as he said: "the issue of race, so nicely contained and deactivated in the Barack Obama political persona, is still very much alive within the man himself. [...] much of the excitement that surrounds him

comes from the perception that he is only lightly tethered to race” (Steel). Obama’s multiculturalism and biraciality may raise the possibility that he is indifferent to race and racism but what I discussed about his journey which is reflected in *Dreams from My Father* to find his racial identity and his determination to be black accentuates his race consciousness. Beyond this reality Obama is aware that most of the problems minorities are being met within the society are rooted clearly in discriminative behavior of social and political systems. But during his political campaign, Obama was relatively conservative in dealing with the issue of race since we should take into consideration that Obama is a biracial with black identity and black appearance and as I stated previously for white Americans he is Too Black, therefore; any apparent speech or bias regarding the race issue and racism (reiterating the mental confusion Reverend Richard Wright created among whites by his anti-American and racist speeches) would lead to the misunderstanding for whites that Obama is merely the one who will be dedicated to African Americans affairs and in the turbulent economic situation of America they would be left alone. So to prevent this pessimistic mindset, Obama preferred to be more cautious in dealing with the issue of race during his campaign.

However; Obama is looking for equilibrating the “need for a national dialogue on race and building a larger coalition within which race was merely one among many issues that would need to be addressed” (Hill 43). I believe Obama’s privilege over socioeconomics rather than race issue and racism had two reasons. First, Obama during the years of his interaction with black Americans in South Side was limited in his dream to a position like Harold Washington to develop the African Americans lives, but during those three years he understood that this dream is not possible without standing in a higher position and taking into consideration all social groups. He knew very well that to make the puzzle all ethnic categories are involved and African Americans are a part of this big puzzle. Later in his second book *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* which published in fall 2006 when he was preparing himself for his great campaign of U.S presidency he writes:

- what would help minority workers are the same things that would help white workers: the opportunity to earn a living wage, the education and training that lead to such jobs . . . This pattern—of a rising tide lifting minority boats—has certainly held true in the past. The progress made by the previous generation of Latinos and African Americans occurred primarily because the same ladders of opportunity that built the white middle class were for the first time made available to minorities as well (144).

And second, Obama’s role in facing the race issue is to mostly to highlight the existing and continuous tracks of racial discrimination and unfair division of wealth and opportunities and not to censure any particular group as the reason of blacks and other minority groups’ poverty.

On his first 100 days in office when a reporter asked Obama about his program for black unemployment at the press conference he answered: “Keep in mind that every step we’re taking is designed to help all people” (Washington Wire, 2009). Obama’s anxiety to solve the socioeconomic problems is neither limited to the African Americans nor to any minority group, but he believes that the overall improvement in living standards in America is depended to a “raceless” policy in which both minority groups (blacks, Latinos, Hispanics, Asians etc.) and the majority white Americans are cooperating closely. As a biracial president who clearly identified with African Americans, Obama is well aware that advocating of a specific racial group will results in the entrenchment of prejudice and confusion within the society which follows to a wider gap between races. Whereas some critics believe that Obama’s political campain de-emphasized the discourse of race and racism in America as Remnick notes “nothing has ended, of course the and questions of race—cultural, legal, penal, educational, social—remain despite all the evident promise and progress since the civil-rights movement.” (638). But I believe that Obama’s inauguration is the culmination of the past freedom fights and can be a sign of racial progress for a “post-racial” America where the remains of long lasting racial discrimination would be disappeared for ever.

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