

## Identity Formation Crisis in Barack Obama's *Dream from Father*

SILUE Zana Adama

Doctoral student, English Department

Alassane Ouattara University-Bouake

[silzadam86@yahoo.fr](mailto:silzadam86@yahoo.fr)

### Introduction

Characters issued from miscegenation often involve in a self-questioning process about whether they are white or black. Because of this racial in-betweenness, they feel reluctant to side with one of their two identities, while the United Nations of America politic of identity obliged them to choose only one part of their double identities mainly the blacks. Whereas they are unwilling to choose between the whites and the blacks which combine to form their uniqueness. As a result, biracial children often end up feeling a dual sense of self. This situation creates in them a crisis as the duality of their identity excludes one another. African American literary productions often present biracial children as split characters searching for a unite sense of self. The topic "Identity Formation and the Crisis: A Study of Barack Obama's *Dream from Father*" aims at showing that the family plays a key role in preventing biracial-children to endure a crisis linked to their dual sense of self. In the process of these children self-construction, the family can help them tcreate a whole sense of self free from doubt and malaise.

In order to show in which away the process of identity formation exempts a biracial-child from a crisis, I resort to key concepts from psychoanalysis as literary tool to examine the psychology of Obama as member of a marginalized group and how he frames his identity after the group without being negatively affected as it is traditionally examined in African American literary production.

## I. Construction of a Positive Sense of Self

In most of the literary productions of African Americans of the twentieth century, be it with Du Bois, Alain Locke or Richard Wright Blackness is described as something unwanted. In these literary productions black identity is rejected not only because of racism, but also because of its internalization. Contrary to these novels, Barack Obama's *Dream from my father* presents black people included Obama himself who identify as black and are not tormented because of their racial identity. Through, the book Obama identifies himself as African American. He presents his roots in the following line talking of his father: "he was an African... a Kenyan of the Luo tribe, born on the shore of Lake Victoria in a place called Alego." (Obama 9) Growing up without properly knowing his father since he was back in Kenya after his studies, Obama's mother, a white woman with the help of his grandparents help the young Obama to construct a positive image of his father. In that respect, the notion of family seems to be significant in rearing, providing peaceful, and secured environment to rise in love, steady and self-confidence children, who would not at least suffer from severe crisis in relation to their identity.

By the way, in "The Reconstitution of Black Families in America During Slavery in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*," Dr. KOFFI Yssa Desire established the link between a person's identity formation and the family when he writes that "Each individual comes from a family and it is through the family that the individual acquires his sense of being."<sup>1</sup> His argument highlights the significant role of the family in building a person sense of belonging. He states that families namely the plantation family, the domestic family and single parent family which were formed during slavery have helped to keep a sense of unity among blacks. As a result, though slavery destroys the black by depriving them from a sense of belonging, the Blacks still create a family everywhere they are no matters situation and the condition. These family help to unite the Blacks as a community so as to face their plight.

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<sup>1</sup> Revue Baobab: Numéro 8 p. 229

When Obama first comes to Africa, searching for his roots, he realizes that in Africa family is everywhere. Wherever you go you find a family tie. Obama considers Kenyans' notion of family within circles. He draws a first circle which represents family where love is unquestioned, and then a second circle in which family is a negotiated commitments. Finally he draws a big circle around the first two circles. It represents family makes of acquaintances. (Obama 328) He Contrasts western vision of family to Kenyans' perception of family and concludes that in Kenya family is everywhere. Whether he was at the post office or the park, his father's name evoked responses and memories. Any need he had would be met by someone at some time no matter what lengths they went through to fulfill them. In such community children rarely endure crisis since Children's education is a common affair, and family who does not have children may be given a child to rise. This notion of family is in contrast with western notion of nuclear family.

Examining these different conceptions of the notion of family we come to point out a common characteristic to all this definitions. Indeed, within these ideas of family, the sense of belonging seems to be the common characteristic. The notion of family appears as a backbone that maintains together individuals and subsequently permits the children to grow in an environment free from self-questioning. This common duty in rearing children is what the Whites have destroyed in African Americans during slavery as view in most of their novels. Consequently, blacks people teens as well as grown up people lose close sense of who they are and subsequently long to acquire it.

. In the process of his identity construction, Obama comes to meet the Robison's family which gives him a real sense of family as his desired. He describes the Robison's family as an example of family which guarantee stability and self-confidence to it members through mutual support. He writes "it wasn't until I met Michelle's family that I began to understand her." (Obama's *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* 389) The family,

as described by Obama appears to be a well-organized, lovable and prosper place to bring up the children. He states,

There was Frasier, the kindly, good-humored father, who never missed a day of work or any of his son's ball games. There was Marian, the pretty, sensible mother who baked birthday cake, kept order in the house, and had volunteered at school to make sure her children were behaving and that the teachers were doing what they were supposed to be doing. There was Craig, the basketball-star brother, tall and friendly and courteous and funny, working as an investment banker but dreaming of going into coaching someday. And there were uncles and aunts and cousins everywhere, stopping by to sit around the kitchen table and eat until they burst and tell wild stories and listen to Grandpa's old jazz collection and laugh deep into the night. (Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, 389)

The Robinson's family has love for each of its member and shares responsibilities. The father plays the role of the provider, yet still finds time to watch the game of his son. The mother keeps the house and make sure that the children are doing well at school. Here is describe a family with a sense of unity where the children feel at ease as the love of the father and the mother covers them all. Obama puts that

What made this vision of domestic bliss all the more impressive was the fact that the Robinsons had had to overcome hardships that one rarely saw on prime-time TV. There were the usual issues of race, of course: the limited opportunities available to Michelle's parents growing up in Chicago during the fifties and sixties; the racial steering and panic peddling that had driven white families away from their neighborhood; the extra energy

required from black parents to compensate for smaller incomes and more violent streets and underfunded playgrounds and indifferent school. (Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, 390)

The passage shows that when the family is united it can overcome any difficulty be it racial, social or economic. In such a family as the Robinson, it is rare that the children suffer from a crisis related to their identity even in time of hardship due to its unity. The book informs us that despite the hardships, and despite the fact that the father's health has deteriorated,

he had carried out his responsibilities to his family without a trace of self-pity giving himself an extra hour every morning to get to work, struggling with every physical act from driving a car to buttoning his shirt, smiling and joking as he labored, at first with a limp and eventually with aid of two canes, his balding head beading with sweat, a cross a field to watch his son play, or across the living room to give his daughter a kiss. (Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, 390)

This passage reveals the responsibility of the parents to protect and cater for the need of the children without complaining. It helps us understand that despite hardship when a family is bound by love it resists the difficulties and raises its children in a good condition. It was this quality called love that missed in the Taylor family in Chester Himes's *The Third Generation*. Chester Himes presents the Taylor family as dysfunctional as the mother and the father has opposing visions of what the family should. When the father wants the children to identify with Blacks, the mother urges them to consider themselves as white. However, being unable to meet none of the parents' recommended identity, the children end up growing without a proper sense of self. Consequently, they endure identity crisis. The novel insinuates that the lack of love between the father and the mother

is the main reason of the family failure. Through the novel, Mrs. Taylors expresses her hatred to black people including her husband. In these conditions, the children cannot construct a sense of self free from crisis.

On contrast, reading *Dream from my Father* it comes out that love between the father and the mother help to frame Obama's identity despite the distance that separates and period of incertitude. Obama family, tough separated physically is bound by love. The mother loves the father and his son. The grandparents also love Obama's father. Thus, the family keeps its unity even separated. Moreover, when contrasting Obama's family to Michelle's family it appears that thought covered by love from his mother and grandfather Obama still endures a slight crisis, mainly because of the absence of his father and the instability it causes in his life. As a young man what he desires is the stability of the Robison's family. He writes,

But back then I saw only the joy of the Robison house. For someone like me, who had barely known his father, who had sent much of his life traveling from place to place, his bloodlines scattered to the four winds, the home that Frasier and Marian Robinson had built for themselves and their children stirred a longing for stability and a sense of place that I had not realized was there. (Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, 390)

Indeed, in this quote, it appears that stability is very important in a notion of family and in raising the children. Yet it is not everything. For example thought Obama has lived in recomposed-family or has lived for longtime with his grandparents, it was with his father they encouraged him to identify. This might be due to the love the mother and the grandparent have for the young boy on one hand, and on the other hand for his father, taking into account the father's personality and qualities which they instilled in the boy as he grows up. As he has grew up and finally searched for his father in a trip to Kenya, he had "the belief

that the story of [ his] family, and [ his] efforts to understand that story, might speak in some way to the fissures of race that have characterized the American experience, as well as the fluid state of identity.” (Obama vii). This sentence explains that Obama has cured from the instability of his identity when he has visited the other part of his dual identity. Therefore, It can be inferred that the notion of family is crucial in rearing children mainly in time of identity crisis. Family is the first community where a person finds belonging and constructs his sense of self.

## II. Evolution of Identity Based on the model

In his book *Identity Cises: A Social Critique of Postmoderty*, Robert G. Dunn contrasts the modern and the postmodernity form of identification. He critiques the postmodernity form of identity construction which according to him creates crisis because parents do no longer have time to educate the child. Children are the product of mass medias. As a result, they often endure crisis due to the absence of their parents or due the absence of a role model that will guide them. However, despite, the siege of postmodernity, he states that Family remains the place where children build a firm identity before confronting the outside world. In other words, parents are the first models on which children build their sense of self.

Sigmund Freud ascertains this idea of the necessity to present a role model for children when he elaborates some steps that lead to an individual’s identity formation. First, he opines that identification is the original form of emotion tie with an object. He writes that “identification is known to psycho-analysis as the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person.”(Freud 60) That is any individual in society always constructs his personality based on an existing model either in the family or outside it. He furthermore notes “identification Endeavour to mould a person own ego after the fashion of the one that has been taken as a model.” (Freud 60) In the lenses of the above quotes, one can perceive the reason

why Obama's maternal family endeavors to carve his son's identity out of his father's one by creating an emotional tie between the two. Throughout the novel it is noticeable that the boy has been educated after his father's image, principles and character. His father personality and character were guidelines for him to become a man. Obama's mother often told him, referring to the father "he had led his life according to principles that demanded a different kind of toughness, principles that promised a higher form of power." (Obama 50) Then, decided Obama should follow his example. She continues arguing that Obama had no choice for "It was in the genes...your brains, your character, you got from him" (Obama 50) This positive depiction of the father according to the mother are to be the traces that her son has to follow to grow in an environment that regards the black people with contempt.

Furthermore, she even encourages him to identify with famous blacks. She makes him believe that "every black man was Thurgood Marshall or Sidney Poitier; every black woman was Fannie Lou Hamer or Lena Horne." (Obama 51) He has to know that "to be black was to be beneficiary of a great inheritance, a special destiny, glorious burdens we were to carry with style". (Obama 51) Obama states that "more than once, my mother would point out; 'Harry Belafonte' is the best-looking man on the planet." (Obama 51). Thus, Obama as a child has role models after who he has to build his personality. This makes him know that his success counted and there are people who care and love him as he is. This makes him "one of the luckier ones, having been given a stretch of childhood free from self-doubt." (Obama 51) The latter sentence indicates the necessity of a role model for the children in the process of their identity construction. More importantly, this image has to be positive since according to Erikson any individual has a positive and negative aspect of identity depending on which one an individual develops, he can endure or avoid a crisis of identity.

Similarly, the grandfather presents a positive image of his youth and of the father through the stories he narrates to the boy. These stories aim at helping the



young boy to grow with confidence and accept his black identity. The impact of the discourse of the grandfather is enhanced when one considers Erickson's as he opines that personal identity is developed with the influence from family and personal relationships. (Erikson, *Identity and life cycle* 22) Actually, family plays a significant role in positively influencing the young boy to construction a secure sense of self. Highlighting the key role of his grandfather in his book, *Dreams from My Father*, Obama states:

Gramps would wander into my room to tell me stories of his youth, a new joke he has read in Readers Digest, or a story about my father. I can still picture Gramps leaning back in his old stuffed chair after dinner, sipping whiskey and cleaning his teeth with the cellophane from his cigarette pack, recounting the time that my father almost threw a man off the Pali Lookout because of a pipe (55).

Here is a perfect example of Erickson's theory of self-identity when he elaborates that each person has a positive and negative aspects of identity. So, since Obama gained a positive view of his African father from the stories told by his white grandfather, he is less likely to develop a crisis of identity.

Furthermore, Erickson pinpoints that self-esteem is an important factor in choosing one's identity, and if one lacks self-esteem and confidence, it may cause identity problems. Visibly as a child, Obama has been saved from crisis because his grandparents embraced his father's Kenyan ethnicity. For example, when Obama attended school in Hawaii, his grandfather informed his teacher of Obama's Kenyan heritage. The book stated,

Miss Hefty took attendance and read my full name; I heard titters break across the room. Frederick leaned over to me. 'I thought your name was Barry.' 'Would you prefer if we called you Berry?' Miss Hefty asked. 'Barack is such a beautiful

name. Your grandfather tells me your father is Kenyan. I used to live in Kenya, you know. Teaching children just your age, it's such a magnificent country (Obama60).

This is an example of how Obama's maternal family helped him develop a positive self-esteem about being African American; this type of positive influence made him proud to identify with being African American.

When the link between the boy and the father is created, then comes the second level of identification. Freud informs us that "in a regressive way [identification] becomes a substitute for a libidinal object tie, as it were by means of introjections of the object into the ego". (Freud 61) Having being encouraged by those he loves the most, namely his mother and his grandparents, to identify with his absent father, he would absorb that image of his father handed to him in his ego by means of introjections. Put simply, he will adopt the identity (here identity includes race and personality) of his father. This identity will guide him for better or for worst.

The image of the father is received from his white family can be considered as a bridge that links him to this absence father. This image has to influence him all along his life journey. It is this influence that will keep him from collapsing in time when he was lonely and might fall in crisis like Helga Crane in *Quicksand*. Actually, Nella Larsen presents her main character in *Quicksand* as a lonely girl with no family tie rejected by her white parents as well as her black family. He is unable to define who she is: black or white? This absence of family tie and with no support, Helga suffers from a severe crisis of identity. However, in Obama case, when he was away from his mother and his Grandparents, it was his father's image which guided and helped him raise himself as black man. His father would often write to him and in his solitude the letters will connect them as he reads and rereads the letters. He writes "away from my mother, away from my grandparents, I was engaged in a fitful struggle. I was trying to raise myself to be a black man in America." (Obama 76) Here Obama

shows that he has finally absorbed his father's identity as he accepts his identity of black man and struggles to raise himself as such.

Yet he still needs his father to complete the process of his identification. Then he writes "My father's letters provided few clues [to raise myself as a black man]." (Obama 76) In his letters the father would "report that everyone was fine, commend on [Obama's] progress in school, and insist that [Obama's] mother, Maya, and [Obama] were all welcome to take [their] rightful place beside him whenever [they] so desired." (Obama 76) The letters give Obama a sense of belonging. His father will furthermore include some pieces of advice such as "water find its level, you will arrive at a career that suits you". (Obama 76) despite the distance, Obama's father connects with him, inspires him, encourages and guides him so that he grows up as a dignified and responsible black man by means of identification.

The novel reveals Obama's absorption of his father's image and subsequently identifies with him through the letters the father and the son exchange. Correspondence appears to be significant in erasing the distance and filling the void that the father's absence could create. The letters often arrive in period when Obama needed guidance or they will give him stamina when he is about to lose hope. In such moments, he would find out the letters and reads them. For example, when Obama first arrived in Chicago. It was out of an arrangement with a friend of him who has to leave Chicago and Obama will rent the house, yet when he arrives the man's phone number was not working. Not knowing where to go as was lonely; he dug out from his pocket a letter of his father. The letter gives him some connection. Letter reads that

you will be pleased to know that all your brothers and sisters here are fine, and send their greetings. Like me they approve your decision to come home after graduation....Barry, even if it is only for a few days, the important thing is that you know your people, and also that you know where you belong. (Obama 114)

Reading the letter, he was relieved for he knows despite the predicament in which he is, there are some people who care about him. People who, it is true he doesn't know, but whose blood runs in his veins and who love him. This knowledge gives him relief and stamina to struggle.

Freud mentions that the death of the person one identifies with can lead to a crisis mainly when there is a strong emotional tie between the object and the ego. Thus, the novel shows the emotional tie between Obama and his father when he was informed about his father's death, he first takes the information for granted and then replaying the image of his father, the story his grandparents have told him concerning the father and the letters they have written to each other he realizes the positive impact of his father on him even on distance. He goes in bed and wept. He notes

I awoke still weeping, my first real tears for him....I turned on the light and dug out his old letters. I remembered his only visit, the basketball he had given me and how he had taught me to dance? And I realized, perhaps for the first time, how even in his absence his image had given me some bulwark on which to grow up, an image to live up to, or to disappoint....I needed to search for him, I thought to myself, and talk with him again.  
(Obama 129)

The death of his father reinforces the emotional tie between him and the death father. From the above lines, it comes out that the power of separation and destruction death often bears is nullified and replaced with the realization of the influence the father has had on him even in his absence. He concludes his thought with the decision of "search[ing] for him". Later, accounting the uniqueness of the influence his father has on him, he writes

Yes, I'd seen weakness in other men...Gramps and his disappointment, Lolo and his compromise. But these men had become object lessons for me, men I might love but never

emulate, white men and brown men whose fates didn't speak to my own. It was into my father's image, the black man, son of Africa, that I'd packed all the attributes I sought in myself, the attributes of Martin and Malcolm, DuBois and Mandela.....my father's voice had nevertheless remained untainted, inspiring, rebuking, granting or withholding approval. You do not work hard enough, Barry. You must help in your people's struggle. Wake up, black man. The fantasy of my father had at least kept me from despair. Now he was dead, truly. (Obama 220)

From the above mentioned it comes out that Obama's father image has guided him from his childhood still he teenage life and though, his voice had nevertheless remained untainted, inspiring, rebuking, granting or withholding approval as he would scold him for not working hard enough. Or urge him in helping in his people's struggle. The fact that he had never truly known him, has had a fantasy image of him and yet has absorbed his image had at least kept him from despair. As a result, he has not only accepted his father but also his father's people.

### **III. Identification with the Group**

In the final level of identification Freud informs us that "it may arise with every new perception of a common quality shared with some other persons who are not an object of the sexual instinct" (Freud 61). The individual, having by means of identification choose a role model and absorbed his model by means of introjections, then searches to connect with other persons whom he shares common qualities with. The third step of the process of identification appears in *Dream from my Father* when the boy, having internalized the character and the personality of his father, then chooses his friend based on those values and principles that now govern his life.

In other words, growing as an African American Obama learns to be selective in his friendship in order to avoid being mistaken for a sellout. He diversifies his friendship circle, choosing "The more politically active black students. The foreign students. The Chicanos. The Marxist professors and

structural feminists and punk rock performance poets.” (Obama100) Obama’s choice of his friend can be link to his father’s personality, especially when the novel states that his father has been in Kenya government, he has married a white woman after he has turn to Kenya, and that he was open-minded. So, no surprise, in the list Obama dressed as guideline for his friendship, there was people with political commitment and people with different racial background. He seems to be searching his father’s character in his friend or people whom in decide join in companionship.

The list of his friends is a sum up of his father’s personality. So his friends have to share the qualities of his father which he identifies with. He knows in this posture he can embrace his black brothers and sisters, whether in America or in Africa, and affirm a common destiny without pretending to speak to, or for, all their various struggles. He knows that despite the fact that some people may be racist, a term he rarely uses “None of our white friends, guys like Jeff or Scoot from the basketball team, treated us any differently than they treated each other. They loved us and we loved them back. Shit, seemed like half of ‘em wanted to be black themselves.” (Obama 82) In his interaction with people of diverse races Obama comes to realize races’ relation has shifted from overt hatred to collaboration and more some White even envy black culture and wish they were Black.

We are now in what was predicted by Martin Luther King and advocated by highly educated African American figures such as W.E.B. Dubois and others. They advocated recognition of black art and Proclaimed equality with Whites. In *Soul Of Black Folk* Dubois’ thought is put in nutshell in these terms:

[The black] does not want to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa; he does not wish to bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he believes—foolishly, perhaps, but fervently—that Negro blood has yet a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it

possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without losing the opportunity of development” (Dubois 45-46).

Though today, Dubois and his followers are not present yet their claim have been heard. Their aim consisting in making the black race and black culture recognized and accepted has come to be a reality. African Americans now live side by side with other races in the United States society and none of them are ashamed of their identity. More importantly, children issue from miscegenation like Obama are free to choose who they are and will be accepted as such in most case. No one will accuse them of pretending to be White or Black

Being raise in a White Family and build his identity to accept his blackness, When Obama finally integrates the black community as a black man, he searches for a religious community that bears the principle he values. A community that speaks to humankind and human value in general. This may make him join his dual identities. He finds part of this predicament in the Trinity church of Chicago. A brochure of the Trinity church guidelines list at the top of the top a commitment to God,

who will give us the strength to give up prayerful passivism and become Black Christian activists, soldiers for black freedom and the dignity of all humankind then a commitment to the black community and black family and education, the work, ethic, discipline, and self-respect (Obama 284)

In the light of this quote, we understand that the black cause of today blends with the one of all humankind which is for dignity, family, education, work, ethic, discipline, and self-respect. The novel reveals that among all the churches Obama has visited none of them has impressed him like the Trinity Church of Reverend Wright. In the Trinity Church he has found some common qualities which help him to identify with it and embrace its principles and values.

The philosophy of the church and the background of the preacher seem to serve as a natural bridge between him and his fellows in faith. Obama's process of identification ends as he finds common quality with those, he now interacts. Freud informs us that "the more successful may this partial identification becomes, and it may thus represent the beginning of a new tie" (Freud 61) Obama has come from an all-white upbringing to search for new identification with African American. Yet he does not limit there, he moves to Africa to search for his African identity and reconcile with his father on his sepulcher. Obama's process of identity construction can be a guide to bring up children issue from miscegenation who will not suffer from a severe fragmented sense of self.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of the issue of identity construction and the crisis in Barack Obama's *Dream from My Father* proves that role the of the family is crucial in preventing biracial-children to endure a crisis linked to their dual sense of self. To sum it all, in the process of miscegenated-children self-construction, the family is significantly necessary to help them create a whole sense of self free from doubt and malaise. In the case study, Obama's mother and maternal grandparents have help him identify with his absent father. As a result, he learns to accept blackness through the positive image his has of his father. In this condition he succeed in constructing a secure black identity free from crisis as it is often seen in the literature about children issued from miscegenation.

Freud's analysis in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* is used as literary tool to examine the psychology of Obama as member of a marginalized group and how he frames his identity after the group without being negatively affected. The analysis shows that the process of Obama's identity construction has gone through three steps. First, he has built his personally after the one of his fathers, second his engrains the character of his father which makes his accept his black identity with confidence. Having accept his blackness his finally identity



with the black community and human communities that share the principle and value that do not discriminate people.

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