

# A Discourse Historical Analysis of Identity Construction in *Becoming* (2018) by Michelle Obama

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## ABSTRACT

Research on identity through written narrative has been popular in the linguistics field over the decades. In this paper, a famous memoir written by Michelle Robinson Obama, *Becoming* (2018), is examined to analyze the construction of identities. This memoir is chosen because of the strong personal narrative and inspiring story which recounts the struggle of the African American woman against discrimination in the United States. This paper focuses on *Becoming Us*, which is examined through the Discourse-Historical Analysis (DHA) by Ruth Wodak. This approach offers several discursive strategies, some of which are referential/nomination and predication that are applied to analyze the linguistic features which provide positive, negative, and neutral representations of the social actor. All these representations contribute to constructing Michelle Obama's cultural and racial identities. The novelty of this research lies in a more linguistic approach and historical context as the endeavors to examine the identities.

**Keywords:** *Becoming*; Identity; Discourse-Historical Analysis.

## INTRODUCTION

Language plays a central part in human communication. Within language, humans express their thoughts and feelings as well as build connections with other people. The way someone communicates can be expressed either in direct interaction or in written text. There are many kinds of written text, one of which is a memoir. A memoir is an example of a literary text which recounts someone's personal experience. *Becoming* is a best-selling memoir published in 2018, written by Michelle Robinson Obama, the former First Lady of the United States. This book tells a remarkable journey of an African American woman who grew up in a working-class environment on the South Side of Chicago. Her life had transformed dramatically when she walked into the political world with her husband, Barack Obama. Along with it, she had to undergo unpleasant experiences regarding her existence as an African American.

The objective of choosing *Becoming* as the corpus is because of the unique literary inheritance and distinct challenges that appear in the autobiography written by women of color (Braxton, 2009, p. 128). In a world where women of color still receive many unequal treatments, Michelle Obama's remarkable journey

becomes an inspiration for the African American woman—not only in the United States but over the world, in perceiving their identities. Previously, some research concerning this memoir has been conducted. Domene-Benito (2019) discussed the importance of *Becoming* in expressing one's voice and explaining the power of being connected with other people, while Kovács (2018) analyzed the role of this memoir as a personal testimony in provoking social changes and finding one's voice amidst the double oppression. In addition, some discourse analysis concerning self-representation and racial discrimination can be found, yet there has not been a study that examines this memoir in the light of discourse perspective linked with linguistic theories. Therefore, the significance of this research lies in a more linguistic approach, which focuses on the linguistic features that are fundamental in constructing identities.

A memoir is not merely a set of chronological events that happened in someone's life, but it offers a further discussion on how someone's identity can be constructed through the written narrative. According to Baxter (2016), the meaning of texts is open to contestation and redefinition, as it is influenced by different readings within varying contexts (p. 36). This matter is closely related to the field of applied linguistics,

especially discourse analysis which examines the language patterns across texts in order to see the relationship between language and the social cultural contexts in which it is functioned (Paltridge, 2012, p. 2). By this, it establishes different perspectives of the world and social identities through its use. The purpose of this research is to examine what kind of identities are constructed in the selected section of Michelle Obama's memoir and how these identities are actualized by nomination and predication strategies offered by Discourse Historical Analysis (DHA).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity is a complex word to be defined. Using Lichtenstein's (1964) perspective, it could be perceived as a pattern in a human life which entirely constituted by sameness within changes (as cited in Holland, 1978, p. 452). In other words, individuals keep changing throughout their lives but at the same time, they continue being themselves with their styles. Talking about identity is closely related to roles. Someone's identity can be associated with discourse participant roles (e.g., author) or temporary situational roles (e.g., teacher) (Johnstone, 2008, p. 151). However, according to Castells (2010), identity is more meaningful and stronger than roles due to the process of self-construction as well as individuation that it entails (p.7). Self-construction is a systematic process that is profoundly entangled with the language itself — not only in terms of syntax and lexicon but the rhetoric and rules for building narrative (Bruner, 2001, p. 36) The statements or utterances used by individuals represent what kind of people they are. According to Linde (1993), there are three important properties of one's identity that are depicted through language. These characteristics are (1) the continuity of the self over time, (2) the distinctness between the self and others, and (3) the reflexivity of the self (pp. 100-105).

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the number of black women's literary works in the autobiographical genre is inadequate, which shows women's unfavorable conditions and marginalization in the dominant society (Braxton, 2009, p. 128). African American women's autobiographies had gotten considerable attention in the 1980s. The autobiography is not served as the medium to recount their personal experiences but also to understand the relationship between the authors and the people with whom they share many valuable realities (Braxton, 1989, pp. 7-9). According to Braxton (2009), one of the distinguishing features between black female and white autobiographies is the notion of "true womanhood." She argued how white autobiographies have a sense of strong individualism, while black female authors tend to regard other black females as heroic characters. They do not turn the spotlight upon themselves, yet they understand the

individual's efforts as something inseparable from the community (p. 131). Furthermore, as also stated by Mourelo (1999), African American authors portrays a self-grounded within the community (p. 98). Their identities derive from the awareness of suffering, in a way that the writers recognize their origins and then undergo deeper development upon the sense of individual and collective uniformity. This aspect is also discernible in *Becoming*, in which Michelle Obama acknowledges the importance of connections with other people, particularly other women, in helping her to become the person she is now.

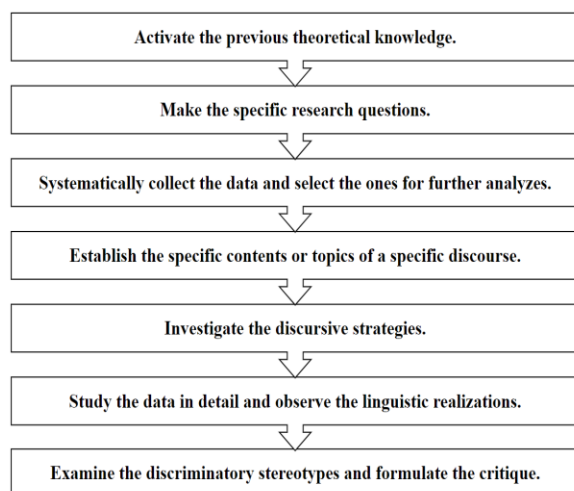
As an attempt to examine the identity's construction, the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) by Ruth Wodak is applied. This approach provides the discursive strategies that concern the positive and negative presentations of self and others, which bolster the validation of identity construction (Wodak, 2009, p. 40). Some characteristics make DHA distinctive from other approaches. First, DHA is considered the most linguistic approach compared to other strategies. Second, the DHA emphasizes more on the historical aspect of the discourse while also being occupied with certain areas of discourse studies. Lastly, related to the concept of discourse, the DHA chose the multi-perspective one. It means that this approach is not only aimed to analyze language, but takes the integration of theory, methods, methodology, and experimental research practices into account to provide a social application (Reisigl, 2017, p. 49).

## RESEARCH METHOD

The corpus chosen for this research paper is Michelle Obama's famous memoir, *Becoming*, which is published by Crown Publishing Group in 2018. This memoir consists of 24 chapters with 448 pages. It is divided into 3 sections, which are *Becoming Me*, *Becoming Us*, and *Becoming More*. This paper focuses on the second part of the memoir, which is *Becoming Us* which consists of chapters 9-18. This particular section is chosen because the conflicts and tribulations faced in *Becoming Us* are the strongest compared to the other parts of the book. To analyze the data, the qualitative method is preferred in this research to get a deeper understanding of the social actor's perceptions. The approach used in this research paper is Discourse-Historical Approach, a framework by Ruth Wodak. The aim of using DHA is to analyze the discourse concerning specific problems, which are identity and discrimination.

In an endeavor to figure out the hidden meaning, discursive strategies are applied in this research. In this paper, the strategies used are referential/nomination and predication because the objectives are suited and relevant for answering the research questions.

Referential/nomination strategy is the basic form of linguistic and rhetorical discrimination to identify individuals or groups by naming them while the predications try to find the negative or positive qualities either through implicit or explicit statements (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 45). According to Reisigl (2008), there are eight systematic stages of doing research practice (pp. 100-101). However, these steps are usually adjusted to each discourse-historical research (Reisigl, 2017, p. 55). Additionally, DHA presents four steps in doing the strategy to analyze racist and discriminatory discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, pp. 29-30). Therefore, the stages are adapted and illustrated in the diagram below.



**Figure 1.** The stages of conducting Discourse-Historical Analysis

## RESULT

The construction of Michelle Obama's identity in the particular section of the memoir concerns a specific discriminatory phenomenon, which is racism. According to Essed (1991), racism "must be understood as ideology, structure, and process in which inequalities inherent in the wider social structure are related, in a deterministic way, to biological and cultural factors attributed to those who are seen as a different race or ethnic group" (p. 43). Racism is understood as a 'process' because the ideology, as well as the structure, occurs within everyday practices. Moreover, Essed used the term 'everyday racism' to strengthen the notion that racism is built through everyday situations, both in cognitive and behavioral practices (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p.7). This perspective allows us to understand that the construction of identities is also a 'process' along with the act of racism itself which is manifested through discourse.

## REFERENTIAL/NOMINATION

The Referential/nomination is a strategy that aims to construct the in-groups and out-groups of the social

actor (Wodak, 2001, p. 73). This discursive strategy explains how the social actor is referred to based on the naming as well as the actions that she did.

## Reference to social actors

According to Hall (1990), the exercise of cultural power and normalization leaves the black people with the experience of seeing themselves as 'other' (p. 225). This understanding is not only perceived within the black people themselves but also rooted deeply in colonial society. In *Becoming Us*, it can be seen how Michelle Obama experienced the feeling of 'otherness' through the reference given to her, especially during the campaign.

- (p. 263) *"I was painted not simply as an outsider but fully **“other,”** ...; suggesting that I'd been unduly influenced by black radical thinkers and furthermore was a **crappy writer.**"*
- (p. 160) *"I moved with the awkwardness of a tourist, aware that we were **outsiders**, even with our black skin."*
- (p. 264) *"A news chyron on the same network had referred to me as **“Obama's Baby Mama”** conjuring cliched notions of black-ghetto America, implying the **otherness ...**"*
- (p. 241) *"In it, she referred to me as a **“princess of South Chicago”**"*

At that time, her final paper was inspected by Christopher Hitchens, one of the writers of the online article. He found Michelle Obama's thesis that discusses the thoughts of African American alumni concerning the issue of race and identity after they studied at Princeton University. He argues how her thesis *"cannot be read at all"* which arguably mocks her intellect. She shares the feeling of being alienated by explicitly using the words *'outsider'* and *'other.'* The word *'outsider'* belongs to the group of de-adverbial anthroponyms, the same as an insider. This word is the linguistic realization of de-spatialisation when someone or something does not occupy the space (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 48). Not only the noun *'outsider'* but she also used the adjective *'other'* to strengthen the notion of being marginalized. In the other case, it is interesting to observe how the word *'outsider'* comes from Michelle Obama herself. It happened when she visited Nairobi for the first time and felt a sense of in-betweenness there. Seeing the context, the feeling of being alienated is different from the one mentioned before. It implies the same meaning, in the sense that someone does not occupy the space, yet the distinction for the latter lies in the unfamiliarity in the new place.

Another shot comes from a news chyron referring to her as *'Obama's Baby Mama.'* This phrase implies the

sense of 'otherness' in her marriage life. Moreover, her relationship with Barack Obama is once again impregnated when she is referred to as '*princess of South Chicago*' by Maureen Dowd of *the New York Times*. She is accused of emasculating Barack when she told a story about Barack's bad habits at home (p. 241). The implication is that she has a perfect trait as a "princess," which cynically offends her.

(p. 262) "*Don't let the **black folks** take over. **They're not like you. Their vision is not yours.**"*

(p. 151) "*Politics had traditionally been used against black folks, as a means to keep us isolated and excluded, leaving us undereducated, un-employed, and underpaid.*"

(p. 208) "*seemingly built for me: **a standard, supremely American, got-it-all strip mall.***"

Discussing otherness is inseparable from the notions of 'differences' and 'sameness.' Each of these traits makes them excluded from other communities, but at the same time includes them in the other one. In this context, a barrier is created between black and white folks. The reference is not only deriving from herself but originates from either Barack's political opponents or elsewhere. They refer to the black folks as 'they,' while 'you' seems to be directed to Americans. It indirectly separates them from the particular group. Looking at the context, they are not only referring to the black folks in general but also specifically talking about Barack's campaign team which includes Michelle Obama there. Not only directed to the person, but they also further mention the vision that infers as if the black people have different manifestations of how America should be in the future. However, it is intriguing how she referred to herself later as '*supremely American*' amidst the said nominations. Eventually, what she meant is more about the common characteristic of Americans. The context is she went to Clybourn Avenue in Chicago and thought that the place is perfect for working mothers like her.

(p. 147) "*The University of Chicago was an elite school, and to most everyone, I knew growing up, **elite meant not for us.***"

(p. 265) "*one that's been forever used to sweep **minority women** to the perimeter of every room, an unconscious signal not to listen to what **we've** got to say."*

Continuing the discussion about being in a certain group, in the sentence above Michelle Obama uses the pronoun 'us' instead of 'me' to show the collective sense of belonging. Traceback to history, segregation at school was a common thing during that era. The elite has more privilege in obtaining an education. Referring

to the statement above, in the other words, 'elite meant not for the minority.' It is apparent how she is contrasting herself with the 'elite' to show her working-class status and lack of power in society. She does not intend to degrade herself and her family, yet she draws a clear line between having a higher position and real potential. She might not become the 'elite,' but she recognizes the ability and capacity that she possesses. The position does not simply define who she is.

Moreover, she is not only classifying herself as non-elite but a '*minority woman*.' When she mentioned the '*minority women*,' she marked her sense of belonging and membership categorization by using the pronoun 'we.' Using the first-person singular, the reference shows a process of assimilation which Leeuwen (2008) divides into two, which are aggregation and collectivization (p. 37). In this case, the use of 'we' and '*minority*' are the linguistic realizations of *collectivization*, the reference to the social actor as group entities. In the other words, she is in the group minority and not in the majority. Generally, '*minority*' and '*women*' are always regarded as powerless positions. Becoming a 'minor' means someone does not acquire much space in society and being a 'woman' tend to be regarded as inferior. Nevertheless, this vulnerable position is not stopping her from boldly speaking up about the things that bother her.

(p. 191) "*It took no time, no thought of all, for me to be fully consumed by my new role **as a mother.**"*

(p. 239) "*and to the compromises I'd made myself **as a working mother** trying to feed her family."*

(p. 254) "*I was **a full-time mother and wife now.**"*

(p. 219) "*I was now **Mrs. Obama** in a way that could feel diminishing,"*

(p. 241) "*but quietly I worried that as my visibility as **Barack Obama's wife** rose,"*

(p. 264) "***ready-to-emasculate Godzilla of a political wife** named Michelle Obama."*

(p. 231) "*I knew the stereotype I was meant to inhabit, **the immaculately groomed doll-wife**"*

(p. 127) "*I was a **lawyer**"*

(p. 161) "***my girl-from Chicago, lawyer-at-desk life**"*

(p. 234) "*I was now what they call a **surrogate** for the candidate,"*

As mentioned in the beginning, identity is deeply related to roles. A new role attached to Michelle Obama is becoming a 'mother,' and she describes it using some neutral adjectives, such as '*working*' and '*full-time*.' Interestingly, being a 'full-time' mother does not prevent her to have her career. Otherwise, her work is not an excuse for her to become a 'part-time mother.' Although she uses neutral terms in describing her roles, in her memoir she positively views motherhood by saying '*motherhood became my motivator*' (p. 191).

Being the wife of Barack Obama is undeniably part of Michelle Obama's identity, but it does not solely determine who she is. She is concerned with the role she is attached to, yet the false caricatures directed at her during the campaign put much pressure on her. She received some negative attributions, such as "*ready-to-emasculate Godzilla of a political wife*" and "*the immaculately groomed doll-wife.*" These two depictions are problematic in nature as the first one implies her immense power while the other one suggests her lack of agency. The use of the word '*Godzilla*' here is known as the process of *personification* or *anthropomorphisation*, the specific form of metaphor aimed to give human traits to inanimate objects, abstract beings, phenomena, and notions (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 58). In her memoir, she expressed her irritation towards the accusations, however, Barack Obama's campaign team asked her not to respond to not complicate the situation.

Next, being a wife does not carry a negative connotation, but people throw negative descriptions which construct the destructive characteristic of her. As the supportive wife, she is also the "surrogate" for Barack Obama, a stand-in person who represents him in other places to maximize the campaign. It means that she has a high frequency of public appearance, which also sets her in a vulnerable position and prone to criticism. At that time, she was also a lawyer, although later she changed her occupation to suit her passion.

(p. 228) "*I was a **Midwesterner***"

(p. 242) "*At some point, the campaign began referring to me as **the Closer***"

(p. 220) "*As a **lifelong pragmatist**, I would always counsel a slow approach, ...; I was a natural-born fan of the long and judicious wait.*"

(p. 156) "*I was a **traditionalist***"

(p. 264) "*interpreted by one Fox commentator as a **terrorist fist jab**,*"

(p. 260) "*She's **not a patriot**.*"

In addition, there are several ways in which someone is categorized. According to Leeuwen (2008), when someone is referred based on the action or activity that they carry out, it is known as *functionalization*. This categorization is realized in three ways. First, by a noun derived from a verb through suffixes such as *-er*, *-ant*, *-ent*, *-ian*, *-ee*. Second, a noun that indicates a place or tool closely connected with certain activities through suffixes like *-ist* and *-eer*. Lastly, the nouns that signify places or tools related to activity and generalized categorizations, for instance, "man" (p. 42). This type of categorization is realized through several nouns mentioned above. Some of them give neutral and positive connotations, while others give negative meanings. The references such as '*midwesterner*' and

*'closer*' carry the *-er* suffixes that show the connection with certain verbs. However, it is an exception for '*midwesterner*' because this noun is derived from a geographical name and implies a neutral meaning while '*closer*' is giving positive attribution to Michelle Obama since this reference is given by her staff in appraising her ability to make up minds during the campaign. The evidence is shown in her effort in establishing personal connections with the people she met (p. 270) to get closer to them.

Other references are the realizations of the second type of *functionalization*, such as '*lifelong pragmatist*,' '*traditionalist*,' and '*terrorist*.' Although all the nouns are ended with *-ist*, none of these are associated with a certain place or tool. The first two verbs inferred by herself convey neutral meanings and cannot be classified as either positive or negative. The former expresses her practicality in approaching problems and the latter asserts the attachment to tradition—when talking about marriage. The last noun is drawn by other people denoting negative meaning, suggesting that she is dangerous and would not hesitate to advocate violence. This phrase is rooted in the false prejudice thrown at Barack and Michelle Obama during the presidential campaign. In addition, it creates a more destructive image of her when relating the word '*terrorist*' with another accusation saying, '*she is not a patriot*.' It is arguable whether it should be believed or not. Nevertheless, it is worth questioning the phrases because they originated from those who are not even close to Michelle Obama.

(p. 172) "*We were the **poorer version of the Cleavers**.*"

(p. 209) "*This was me at the age of forty, a little bit **June Cleaver**, a little bit **Mary Tyler Moore**.*"

In identifying herself, Michelle Obama is not only describing who she is but also associating herself with other characters. She depicts herself as June Cleaver, a woman from the *Leave It to Beaver*, and Mary Tyler Moore from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. In this context, Michelle Obama creates a *symbolization*, when "fictional" characters represent a non-fictional social actor in social practices (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 48). In her memoir, she even stated, "*I wanted to live with the hat-tossing, independent-career-woman zest of Mary Tyler Moore*" (p.173), expressing her admiration for a woman with a balanced life. Furthermore, June Cleaver is a housewife with a complex character. Although she is living in the 1950s when the narrow perception of women is highly circulated, she has a different mindset about how women could be. Both characters become Michelle Obama's role models and contribute to her process of individuation.

**Reference to actions related to Michelle Obama**

The actions done by Michelle Obama are the real embodiments of the reference that are directed to her. The reference to her actions strengthens the construction of her identity because they most likely validate the reference which is aimed at her earlier.

- (p. 117) *“I’d scored myself two Ivy League degrees ... I had a seat at the table at Sidley & Austin. I’d made my parents and grandparents proud.”*
- (p. 236) *“My job, I realized, was to be myself, to speak as myself. And so I did.”*
- (p. 248) *“We’d accomplished something historic, something monumental”*

Throughout her life, Michelle Obama has achieved some remarkable accomplishments. She was successful in her academic life and kept thriving as a working mother. She was also courageous to speak out about herself and her values. It is undeniably rigorous to frankly share who she is in front of the public, especially in a discriminative society, but she managed to do it. When a social actor is shown as an individual who is actively doing the activities, the *activation* occurs (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 33). It represents the social actor as an active agent, not merely accepting what is going on. Furthermore, she is also a type of person who appreciates teamwork and rarely thinks highly of

herself. At that time, they secured the Iowan voters by getting an almost double vote from the turnout compared to four years earlier. She does not boast by saying ‘I’d accomplished’ yet she fully realizes it is the result of working together.

- (p. 270) *“At public events, I focused on making personal connections with the people I met.”*
- (p. 262) *“I tried to be more careful about how the words came out of my mouth, ...; I was still proud and encouraged”*
- (p. 206) *“I began to see how I’d been stoking the most negative parts of myself,”*
- (p. 258) *“Over time, I’d gotten better about not measuring my self-worth strictly in terms of standard, by-the-book achievement,”*
- (p. 207) *“I recommitted myself to being healthy.”*

Throughout this time, Michelle Obama keeps growing into a better version of herself. In the process of campaigning, she focused on making personal connections and trying to be more careful when speaking in public. At that moment, her speeches were sometimes twisted by the conservative radio and TV talk shows. Once, she is accused of hating America because they only focused on a certain part of her speech. It serves as a warning for her to be more careful about her utterances. Another positive attitude that she had is her awareness of what was wrong with her. She reflected on the negativity as well as her mindset related to self-

**Table 1.** Summary of nomination strategy

Reference/ Nomination	Positive	Negative	Neutral
	a standard, supremely American, got-it-all strip mall. Mrs. Obama Barack Obama’s wife Surrogate of the candidate The Closer	Other Crappy writer Outsiders Obama’s Baby Mama Princess of South Chicago	Black folks A working mother A full-time mother and wife A lawyer My girl-from Chicago, lawyer-at-desk-life
<b>Reference to social actor</b>	A little bit June Cleaver, a little bit Mary Tyler Moore	Minority women Ready-to-emasculate Godzilla of a political wife The immaculately groomed doll-wife A terrorist Not a patriot Poorer version of the Cleavers	A midwesterner As a lifelong pragmatist A traditionalist
<b>Reference to actions</b>	I’d scored myself two Ivy League degrees ... I had a seat at the table at Sidley & Austin. I’d made my parents and grandparents proud. My job, I realized, was to be myself, to speak as myself. And so I did. We’d accomplished something historic, ...	I focused on making personal connections I began to see how I’d been stoking the most negative parts of myself, ... I’d gotten better about not measuring my self-worth strictly in terms of standard, ... I recommitted myself to being healthy. I tried to be more careful about how the words came out of my mouth	

worth and identity. Also, she improved her physical health by rearranging the workout time to boost her strength. These are all her efforts to create a balanced life that she strives for. Once again, the process of *activation* occurs.

## PREDICATION

In the previous strategy, referential/nomination focuses more on the naming and actions of the social actor. Seeing the objectives of both referential/nomination and predication strategies, the distinction between them is not always clear-cut so some examples provided in this strategy may coincide with the previous ones. The realizations of this strategy can be seen through stereotypical, evaluative attributions of negative or positive qualities. Those qualities are actualized either through implicit or explicit predicates (Wodak, 2001, p. 73). In this section, the predicates are classified into two, such as physical appearance and characteristics.

### Physical appearance

Becoming the First African American who served as the First Lady of the United States gives Michelle Obama numerous compliments and respect, but also criticisms of her physical appearance.

- (p. 265) *"I was female, black, and strong, which to certain people, . . . translated only to angry."*  
 (p. 147) *"Being black and from the South Side,"*  
 (p. 162) *"that I was black through and through, basically as black as we come in America."*

In the statements above, she acknowledges her existence as a black woman by explicitly stating it using the personal pronoun 'I.' This is the process of *individualization* when social actors are referred to as individuals (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 37). Here, the notion of being a black woman carries a neutral connotation, yet it carries a positive attribution since it is attached with the adjective 'strong.' The word 'strong' means the quality of having great power, either physical or emotional. However, some people draw an implausible conclusion by regarding this trait as getting 'angry.' Apparently, she got a different representation contrary to how she viewed herself.

- (p. 237) *"What was it like to be a five-foot-eleven,"*  
 (p. 264) *"A too-tall, too-forceful,"*

Furthermore, she has ever been asked by some reporters and acquaintances the same form of a question, *"What was it like to be a five-foot-eleven, Ivy league-educated black woman speaking to roomfuls of mostly white Iowans?"* I particularly highlight the physical trait that implies her difference from other people, especially white Iowans in this case. Her height is seen

as *'too tall'* because generally, women's height does not reach that point. An important question to ponder is, "would Michelle Obama receive this kind of question if she is part of the white Iowans?"

### Characteristics

After discussing the predication directed to Michelle Obama's physical appearance, now the ones regarding her character are examined.

- (p. 258) *"I considered myself a confident, successful woman"*  
 (p. 191) *"I'm a detail-oriented person"*  
 (p. 199) *"and hard-driving like their mom"*  
 (p. 210) *"I was now more cautious, protective of my time,"*  
 (p. 237) *"Ivy League-educated black woman speaking to roomfuls of mostly white Iowans?"*  
 (p. 119) *"I, meanwhile, was an in-your face- sort of person"*

Looking at the phrases and statements above, it is clear how Michelle Obama identifies herself. She explicitly uses adjectives with positive meanings, such as 'confident,' 'successful,' 'detail-oriented,' 'hard-driving,' 'more cautious,' and 'protective.' Other people also refer to her as 'educated.' Her upbringing is instrumental in constructing this way of mind-set. In this section of the memoir, she shared how she had been "raised to think positively" (p. 117) as well as "to be confident and see no limits" (p. 173). It contributes to her act of perseverance as there are myriad times when she is tempted to give up, yet she endures the process. Her achievements and role – as a mother and wife also boost her confidence and upgrade herself. Quite distinct from other predication, the last one signifies neutral meaning, which cannot be clearly defined whether it is positive or negative.

- (p. 262) *"a perception of me as disgruntled and vaguely hostile, lacking some expected level of grace."*  
 (p. 266) *"I was tired of being defenseless, tired of being seen as some altogether different from the person I was."*

Besides all the positive predication, she also received the negative ones – both from others and herself. The political world is inarguably fierce, as people are trying to create rumors and slanted commentary toward the opponent. As an active candidate's wife, Michelle Obama was accused of 'disgruntled,' 'vaguely hostile,' and 'lacking grace.' She does not have any ideas where all of those portrayals originated from, but she was

**Table 2.** Summary of predication strategy

Predications	Positive	Negative	Neutral
	Female, black, and strong	A too-tall, too-forceful, ready-to-emasculate Godzilla	Being black and from the South Side Black through and through, To be a five-foot-eleven I, meanwhile, was an in-your-face- sort of person
<b>Physical appearance</b>			
	I considered myself a confident, successful woman	Disgruntled and vaguely hostile, lacking some expected level of grace. Defenseless	
<b>Characteristics</b>	I'm a detail-oriented person and hard driving like their mom I was now more cautious, protective of my time Ivy League-educated black woman		

certain that the purpose is to carry “*less-than-subtle messaging about race, meant to stir up the deepest and ugliest kind of fear within the voting public*” (p. 262).

## DISCUSSIONS

In the previous section, all the nominations and predications about Michelle Obama from *Becoming Us* have been discussed. All the varied representations—positive, negative, and neutral are significant components to formulate the critique regarding the forming of her identities.

### The Construction of Cultural Identity

According to Hall (1990), there are two different perspectives on understanding cultural identity. The first stance defines the said identity in a sense that people hold the same historical experiences and cultural codes which lead to ‘oneness,’ while the second one acknowledges the importance of difference which uniquely constructs someone’s identity (pp. 223-225). The second position allows us to understand how the differences matter, it marks one’s uniqueness and distinctiveness from other people. Besides, aligning with the title of this memoir, this stance believes that identity is a matter of ‘becoming,’ and ‘being,’ which means it also belongs to the future (p. 225).

In analyzing the construction of Michelle Obama’s cultural identity, the second perspective offered by Stuart Hall is used. What constitutes Michelle Obama’s identity cannot be separated from *differences*. Relating identity’s construction with differences as well as analyzing the negative nominations and predication enables us to apprehend the reason why she conceives herself as ‘*other*.’ All those phrases have cornered her and made her feel like an ‘*outsider*’ and ‘*other*’ in such a situation. She is positioned as a

minority and regarded as ‘*defenseless*.’ Therefore, when she received discriminatory stereotypes about her, she realized that they are embedded in the prejudice of African Americans.

In the beginning, some of Michelle Obama’s characteristics are prominent which enables us to perceive what kind of person she is, but then her experiences have constructed a stronger identity for her. Looking at the references concerning her actions, she is the type of person who thrives to be better despite all the stumbling blocks in front of her. As mentioned before, she wrote phrases like “*focused on making personal connections*,” “*be more careful*,” “*I’d gotten better*,” that show the act of ‘*becoming*’ better. Michelle Obama is ‘*being*’ herself but at the same time ‘*becoming*’ an individual who progresses throughout the time. This is the unique dimension of identity, showing the act of consistency but also dynamic simultaneously. Also, as mentioned in the result, she symbolizes herself as June Cleaver and Mary Tyler Moore. She is certainly not like those women, but she perceives herself as becoming them. When an individual associates themselves with other people, it does not turn the person as not authentic, yet it is a process of individuation. The process of individuation also takes the sameness and differences with other people which contribute to the construction of someone’s identity.

Up to this point, the significance of both positive and negative representations has been discussed. Next, the existence of neutral representations also plays a major role in constructing Michelle Obama’s cultural identity. Most of the neutral representations, including the characteristics and roles, allow us to better recognize the social actor and become the determining factors that underlie certain actions. For instance, when she mentioned herself as ‘*midwesterner*,’ ‘*lifelong*



*pragmatist*, ' *traditionalist*, ' it gives the rationale behind Michelle Obama's approach to facing a problem, and what makes her actions fall into place. She has shown the act of perseverance that yields meaningful actions. In addition, the roles attached to her play are crucial in constructing who she is. The different roles she is attached to, such as wife, mother, and career woman, occur in what is known as *relational identification* when the social actor is represented in their relationships with other people and actualized through the nouns mentioned above (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 43). The word ' *wife* ' indicates the marital relationship with Barack Obama, while ' *mother* ' shows the relationship with her beloved daughters. This relationship is significant in strengthening cultural identity.

### The Construction of Racial Identity

Trace back to history, the South Side of Chicago was regarded as the "capital of black America" due to the Great Migration which results in the massive growth of Chicago's black population and was home to some prominent national figures (Manning, n.d.). Ironically, these facts do not necessarily guarantee the welfare of black people. The issues faced by black Chicago residents sparked Chicago Civil Right Movement from 1965 to 1967. The movement aimed to address various issues, including "segregated housing, educational deficiencies, income, employment, and health disparities based on racism and black community development" (Momodu, 2016). Growing up during that time on the South Side of Chicago becomes a crucial element in forming Michelle Obama's identity. This historical context influences her in the way she perceives the reality of black people and the notion of race.

Looking at the personal pronouns used in *Becoming Us*, almost all the representations originated from Michelle Obama, and they are formed due to the inequality which leads her to use those phrases in the memoir. Through the collective pronouns, a strong racial identity is constructed. According to Helms (1990), racial identity refers to "a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common heritage with a particular racial group" (p. 3). The embodiment can be seen when the black folks are referred to as ' *they*, ' while ' *you* ' are directed to Americans, it implies as if they are not united. It becomes a problem since it is related to the democracy of the country, not something biological. Furthermore, Michelle Obama tends to use the word ' *us* ' to refer to herself as a member of the black community and other collective pronouns like ' *we* ' to mark her identity as a minority woman, in this case, African American woman. The racial identity is not only constructed through the nominations but also through

predication, especially related to the physical traits. She explicitly affirms that she belongs to a particular race by saying the phrases such as " *I was female, black, and strong* ", " *Being black and from the South Side* ", " *I was black through and through* ." Acknowledging and embracing herself as part of the black community using the memoir construct a strong racial identity. If previously the said identity is constructed in a collective sense through collective pronouns, this one falls into the individual sense.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Becoming* (2018) as a written narrative prevails in constructing Michelle Obama's cultural and racial identities. Michelle Obama's cultural identity is constructed by nominations which shows her 'otherness,' multiple roles, comparison with other fictional characters, neutral representations, and predication regarding her characteristics, which strongly built the sense of individuation. Besides, the racial identity is formed through the use of pronouns and predication, specifically those concerning her physical appearance. Racial identity as defined above means the identity in the collective sense, in which the importance of historical background and the bond with other people is fundamental.

The contribution of this research paper in the field of language and identity is the application of DHA in forming cultural and racial identities. The linguistic theory also contributes to reinforcing the significance of language in constructing someone's identity. However, this research paper is still limited to *Becoming Us*, so a parallel study on the other sections of the memoir may also be conducted to unravel the identities. Future studies can also work on other discursive strategies to examine more arguments written in the memoir.

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