

**THE DEPICTION OF OBAMA'S BLACK PRESIDENCY BY SELECTED AFRICAN
AMERICAN WRITERS**

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C50/89056/2016

A RESEARCH PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN
LITERATURE, UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI

2018

Declaration

This research project is my original work and has not been submitted for the award of a degree in any other University.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to:

Julia Akinyi Asoyo

(Mum)

Thank you for teaching me that our stories do matter; I hope to tell mine someday.

Asam

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Acknowledgments:

My sincere appreciation goes to my supervisors Prof. Henry Indangasi (for his generosity with the reading materials and thought provoking questions) and Dr. Masumi Odari without whose input I would not have put this together. Thank you for your patience and guidance through the course of this project and also for your timely response after reading my work. Thank You!

I also appreciate the University of Nairobi Graduate School through the Department of Literature for awarding me a University of Nairobi scholarship with which I was able to pursue my graduate studies.

I must also acknowledge the support I received from my lecturers at the Department of Literature: Prof. Henry Indangasi, Prof. C. Chesaina, Prof. Monica Mweseli, Prof. D.H Kiiru, Prof. P. Wasamba, Prof. Alina Rinkanya, Dr. Masumi Odari, Dr. Godwin Siundu, Dr. Tom Odhiambo, Dr. Miriam Musonye, Dr. Makau Kitata, Dr. Kimingichi Wabende, Dr. Judith Jefwa, and Dr. Jennifer Muchiri. Your insights, encouragements and words of advice will always be cherished.

To my only brother—Marvin Mueke—and my extended family, I want to thank you all very much for believing in me, being patient with me, celebrating my “little achievements” and keeping me focused. Thank you all.

To my CITAM Buruburu family: Thank you very much for being such amazing friends before, during, and even after this journey. Your prayers and kind words have seen me through the good, the bad, and the ugly times. The “Disciples”, thank you for being incredible friends who gave me the space to grow, be myself, and always speak my mind. Passy Elly, Val, Tim, Mike, Francis, Grace, Monica, Ruth, Fiona, Mariah, Beryl, and Yvonne, you are forever cherished.

My classmates: Jackie Kosgei, J. M Kwanya, Sifa, Godfrey, Mercy, Apindi, Howard, you have my best wishes.

Dr. Tom Odhiambo, may God continually bless you immeasurably for your unquestionable kindness.

Finally, I thank God for His endless grace, favour, providence, and mercies upon my life this far.

Hebrews 11:1, Isaiah 55: 10-13, Habakkuk 2:2-3.

Abstract

It is true that the election of Barack Obama ushered in sentiments of a post racial America and even expectations that the ghosts of racial injustice would be banished. It was a historic election that elicited various reactions from various segments of the American society, if not the world. That said, this study investigates the depiction of the Obama presidency in *The Black Presidency* by Michael Eric Dyson and *From Auction Block to Oval Office* by Kahlil Almustafa. Their works paint an almost similar picture of America while revealing a very different attitude towards the presidency.

A close reading of both texts—which were written over the same period of time—reveals two contrasting attitudes: While Almustafa celebrates the Obama presidency, Dyson reveals his biased stand by criticising it. In this study, I rely on both formalist and new historicist perspectives, to demonstrate the attitudes that are reflected by both writers and how Americans adapt to the presidency of Obama.

In concluding this study, it clearly comes out that the Obama presidency was significant not only to the Americans but also to the entire world, the naysayers of the presidency notwithstanding. With this considered, it is evident that the Obama administration focused more on issues that affected the entire humanity and not only those that affected his community. Both writers allude to this in their depictions of the presidency: Almustafa values the significance of the presidency not only to the blacks but also to the entire world but Dyson seems to demand that Obama favours the blacks even if it means at the expense of the other communities.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0. Background to the Study

The election of Barack Obama as the first African American president of the United States of America was arguably the most historic moment not only in the United States but also in the world. It was a moment that gave meaning to the declaration that all men are created equal. Compounded with a history of slavery and racism, African Americans had been relegated to the position of second class citizens where they were sold like commodities, brutalized, lynched, and even had their intelligence questioned by their slavers and white supremacists. The thought that an African American would rise to be the president in the United States was unfathomable against the backdrop of such instances of racial injustices. This moment was historical in the sense that it somehow gave meaning to all the protests, tireless marches, and arguably even the deaths of those who fought for the liberation of the African Americans—it gave them a new lease of life. I do agree that in an election there are winners and losers but the winners in this election were more than the losers. The dream that had been deferred had not dried up, festered, stunk, or sagged like a heavy load but instead it had exploded in the form of hope from the most unlikely of places—South Side Chicago—and people—Barack Obama.

Ama Mazama in *The Journal of Black Studies*, argues that “Obama’s quest for the White House provides scholars with a unique opportunity to examine or reexamine race, arguably the most significant category in American history” (3). It was indeed a unique moment that even ushered in notions of a post-racial America. Mazama’s argument on the post racial America is hinged on the fact that Obama’s candidature for the White House received more support from wealthy white men and the growing support from the whites signaled a significant decrease in racial prejudices. This, she argues, would usher in a “new era for race relations” (3). It is interesting to note how the future and aspirations of a continent and more

specifically a race were bestowed upon a “black man”. A man from a race that had not only been considered inferior but also close to being not human. This was a moment that in a way vindicated the black race. A race that had sought to prove itself intellectually—which it did through the writings of James Baldwin, Booker T Washington, and even W.E.B DuBois. The election of an African-American to the highest office in America, if not the entire world, in a way also vindicated the founding fathers of America who declared that “...all men are created equal with certain unalienable rights; that among life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness...” (1).

The candidacy of Obama not only provided scholars with an opportunity to (re)examine race relations in the United States but also provided his detractors with an opportunity to question his identity and further still his “blackness”. Michael Eric Dyson argues that Obama’s “biracial roots and black identity have been a beguiling draw and also a spur to belligerent reaction” (ix). While whites termed him as a “black man”, some blacks thought that he was not black enough.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The Barack Obama phenomenon is one that shaped not only the political landscape but also the historical, and inevitably the literary. Historical reflections have tried to focus on how the struggles of former civil rights leaders paved the way for the success of the Obama candidacy. The struggles that led to the adoption of the *Civil Rights Act* of 1964 which “ended segregation in public places and banned employment discrimination on the basis of race, colour, religion, sex or national origin”, and the *Voting Rights Act of 1965* which sort to overcome legal barriers that kept African-Americans from voting have been the major focus of these reflections. The literary landscape has been shaped by responses of leading black writers on the Obama presidency.

This study is, therefore, concerned with how Kahlil Almustafa and Michael Eric Dyson depict the Obama presidency. The study interrogates the points of divergence in presentation—if any—and also the points of convergence in the presentation of his presidency and also what drives these divergence and convergence argument.

1.2 Objectives

1. To examine the depiction of the Obama presidency in Kahlil Almustafa and Eric Dyson’s writings.
2. To evaluate the fairness in the depiction of the Obama presidency in African American literature.

1.3 Hypotheses

1. Kahlil Almustafa and Eric Dyson are both objective in their depiction of the Black presidency.
2. History is used to justify both the praise and the criticism of the Black presidency

1.4 Justification

The election—if not the candidacy—of Obama as the first African American president was a historical moment. It was a moment that gives us as researchers a moment to reflect on what Obama means not only in Dholuo, which means “one who bends” but also what he means for the racial heritage. It is indeed true that Obama bent the course of history and especially the history of African Americans who in a way saw his election as a moment to behold, a moment that would compare to no other. This was a moment that in a way

vindicated their racial history which was plagued by all levels of imaginable and unimaginable inhumanities. Jabari Asim in *What Obama Means* succinctly captures this moment when he notes that “When I visited my mother last May, much of her room had been converted into what I half-jokingly called a Barack Obama shrine.” (1) As if to pause and let this moment sink in, Almustafa further captures it in his poem on the fourth day of Obama’s presidency by noting “i hope Barack Obama’s presidency will help my family accept my wife...” (10) While Almustafa and Asim paint a hopeful and rather euphoric picture of the Obama presidency, Michael Dyson does not seem to paint the same picture of what he terms the black presidency. In offering what he terms as “...informed and principled criticism” Dyson seeks to unveil how Obama responds “to the plague of police brutality that swept the nation” (1) and “how Obama’s idea of scolding the black America reinforce harmful ideas about black culture?” (1)

This study is driven by the understanding that different perspectives have been offered by different writers on the same presidency. The depictions in the poetry of Almustafa and Dyson’s book present me with what I consider to be the best texts that will enable me sufficiently contribute to the black presidency debate from a literary perspective.

1.5 Scope and Limitations of the Study

In this study, I focus on Michael Dyson’s *The Black Presidency* and Kahlil Almustafa’s collection of poetry, *From Auction Block to Oval Office*. My background readings involve selected writings by African American writers on the presidency of Barack Obama. Other works are also referred to the extent that they are related to the topic of my study.

I am concerned with how the presidency of Barack Obama has been depicted by the aforementioned African-American authors and the issues that drive their presentations. In *From Auction Block to Oval Office*, this study focuses on how the poet celebrates the idea of hope that Barack Obama inspired among Americans and in *The Black Presidency* it focuses on the various criticisms levelled against Obama and from what point these criticisms are told.

1.6 Literature Review

The election of an African American to the *White* House was not something that many had expected to happen. Being a candidate for the presidency of the United States of America was acceptable—it had been done before by the likes of Rev. Jesse Jackson—being president was unfathomable; it was not only a historical moment but a seismic one not only in the history of the United States but also the history of the world. Obama concedes in his *A More Perfect Union* (2004) speech that nowhere in the world would his story be possible. It is at this moment that he reminds the Americans, if not the world, of his decision to run for the presidency of the United States.

I chose to run for the presidency at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together – unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction - towards a better future for of children and our grandchildren. (2)

Reginald Daniels in *Race, Multiraciality, and Barack Obama: Toward a More Perfect Union?* Terms this speech as the “most persuasive piece on U.S race relations since Dr

Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" (51). While it was obvious that Obama would have to deal with his identity during his campaign and even after his election, he did not let this define his candidacy instead he focused on what he considered to be his vision for the United States. He let his policy positions define him.

Ron Walters in *Barack Obama and the Politics of Blackness* explores the murky waters of identity and blackness that Obama had to wade through in his bid to become the president of the United States. His "otherness" was a primary factor in his bid. He was not white because he had a black father and the fact that he was raised by white grandparents counted for nothing. The fact that he also did not share ancestry with other blacks in America was also brought to light when questioning his blackness; his was not a story of slavery within the plantations. Debra Dickinson (2006) argues that "black in the American social and political reality meant the descendants of West African slaves". This thus disqualified Obama's claim to the African American heritage. According to Dickinson, he (Obama) remained to be a voluntary immigrant of African descent. Obama did not fit into the group identity of blackness that Dickinson identified with and defined.

Obama seems to counter this perception of being a representative of the blacks earlier on in his autobiography *Dreams from My Father* where he states that:

I can't even hold my experience as being somehow representative of the black American experience...whether in this country or in Africa, and affirm a common destiny without pretending to speak to, or for all our various struggles—is part of what this book is about. (xvi)

Whereas some Americans seemed to be calling to question his identity and even the authenticity of his 'blackness', this was not the case with his African following. The image and persona of Obama in Africa, and most notably Kenya, was one to be imitated and

commercialised. Karin van Bommel in *Obama Made in Kenya: Appropriating the American Dream in Kogelo* discusses the excitement with which his election was met not only with the residents of Kogelo—hitherto a remote village in Siaya County—but also the entire country. A national holiday was declared by then President Kibaki to celebrate this historic moment, Obama merchandise was put on sale in various towns. His identity was not called to question in Kenya at this moment in time. He was not only *wuod Luo* (son of Luo) but a son of Kenya.

Algernon Austin and I agree with the view that Obama does not see himself as belonging to any single group exclusively and thus is comfortable not speaking for any but for the entire American nation. The pressures of belonging and identifying are what I argue led him to declare in his 2004 Democratic National Convention keynote speech that “...there is not a Black America and a White America...there’s the United States of America”. While not considered black and at the same time not considered white, Obama’s otherness and exclusion from the dominant groups became a unifying factor in a racially divided country. It is also interesting that Obama’s fate was closely tied to that of his father. While Obama successfully fought the external and pressures to conform to the Afro-centric narrative, his father was not that successful in his country. Barack Obama Sr, lost his job due to his stand against the tribal politics that was being played in the then Kenyatta government. His refusal to play into the identity politics is not something that Obama adopted when he became president but even when he was a young man growing up. This is evident when he, in *Dreams from my Father*, warns his Aunt while visiting in Kenya that it is playing into tribal politics that “holds us back.”

Hearing my aunt’s traffic in such stereotypes, I would try to explain to them the error of their ways. “It’s thinking like that that holds us back”, I would say we are all part of one tribe. The black tribe. The human tribe. (348)

My argument is that Obama's refusal or reluctance to be confined to a the specific racial box set him apart not only as a politician but also as a human being. This enabled him to speak to the universal aspirations of humanity; the aspirations of the whites as well as of the blacks, of the young as well as the old, of the voluntary immigrant as well as of the blacks with a history of slavery in the plantations.

Aside from the candidacy of Obama and the post-racial debates, reflections on the texts I am working on have been far and wide. While reviewing *The Black Presidency*, Carlos Lozada of *The Washington Post* argues that Dyson criticises Obama's racial stance. By pointing out the structure in which the book is organised—around the country's major racial events—Lozada argues that Dyson's contention with Obama was his inability to deal with racism; that Obama stood with the status quo and took advantage of the fact that the black community loved him so much to criticise him for his stance on race. He seemingly argues that Obama should have exerted more force and used his position as president to defend the blacks.

In this review, Lozada mainly focuses on the content of the book and offers no critical analysis of it. This further grounds the gap that I intend to fill my study which is to provide a literary analysis of the texts that depict the black presidency and the angles from which the depictions are presented.

Closer home, reflections on the Obama presidency have been done. They have been in the form of biographies, works of fiction and even critical analyses. For this review, I choose to focus on the critical reviews of the said presidency which have been mostly done by Henry Indangasi. In *The Forgotten Heroes in the Unsung Obama Narrative*, Indangasi brings to front somewhat silent narratives in the Obama story. He, Indangasi, talks about the people who in one way or the other played a pivotal role towards ensuring that both Obama's—

senior and junior— a shot at life. In this editorial, Indangasi gives credence to Festus Mutere, a former Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of Nairobi who through Henry Indangasi employed Auma Obama and Elizabeth Mooney who supported Obama senior in his quest to study in the United States of America. Lastly, Indangasi in *How Shakespeare Play Gave Rise to Obama* discusses how the play *Othello* by William Shakespeare somehow showed the world that indeed the idea of a larger-than-life black hero is possible. “...white people have been watching Othello and have as a result accepted and internalised the idea of a larger-than-life black hero” (1). Indangasi notes.

My literature review has spanned from the moment Obama decided to run for office to the moment he was elected as the president of the United States and subsequent studies that were conducted on his candidacy and presidency as far as they have a bearing on my study. From the literature review, it is clear that various scholars have researched on who Obama is and how he has been perceived by different segments of the American society with each scholar aiming at different objectives. In researching on this area some scholars have focused their attention on how he defies afro-centricism, the origins of Obama’s rhetoric on hope, and even the extent if not the strength of his blackness. All these studies try to figure out who Obama is and what he means for the world if not for America and American politics. He is a man who has been analysed from all possible angles.

Putting into consideration the different kinds of research that have been carried out in this field, I have identified a knowledge gap. This gap is driven by the fact that various scholars have offered various insights into understanding the candidacy and subsequently the presidency of Barack Obama. This has been done by analysing Obama as an individual and not his presidency even though several commentaries and publications have been done on it. My study, therefore, will try to fill this gap by researching on how the presidency of Obama

has been portrayed by leading African-American writers paying attention to the literariness used to depict this presidency in the primary texts under study.

1.7 Theoretical Framework

To achieve my objectives, this study relies on Formalism and New Historicism as the main theoretical frameworks.

In this study, my main focus is on the content, diction and unity of the poems of Almustafa and the prose of Dyson. It involves a close reading of the poems to evaluate how the elements work together in articulating the focal point of the study, which is the perception of a black presidency. Formalism, a theory having its roots from Russian Formalists such as Roman Jakobson, provides a reader with the tools needed to understand and enjoy a work of art for its own inherent value as a piece of literary art. Formalist theorists believe in the purity of a literary work and want it isolated from external influences such as historical, social, and cultural influences. According to formalists, a work of art is autonomous and it should be analysed as such while focusing on the component elements such as style, form, tone, language, and logical connections within a literary work. These assertions are taken into consideration, the formalist perspectives will guide the analysis of the poems so as to examine the depiction of the Obama presidency and evaluate the fairness in the depictions.

Ann Dobie in *Theory into Practise: An Introduction to Literary Criticism* (2009) notes that formalism is concerned with how emotion is expressed in art. She cites the explanation given by T. S Eliot, one of the contributors to the theory, regarding objective correlation which states that “a chain of events or situation shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory

experience are given; the emotion is immediately evoked” (34). When examining the facts presented in a poem they should correlate immediately invoking an emotion. The poems that have been examined for this study are grounded on the first 100 days of the Obama presidency. This is the medium for most Almustafa’s themes. The poems contain concrete imagery on the presidency and what it means for Americans and the implications on their daily lives.

This study is in part driven by New Historicism which was developed in the 1980s through the works of Stephen Greenblatt. The theory aims at understanding a work of art through its historical context and also documents the discipline as the history of ideas. New Historicists such as Michelle Foucault argue that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices. The theory is based on the fact that literary and non-literary texts circulate inseparably. Most importantly, it holds the view that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths, or expresses the inalterable human nature. New historicism seeks to add new perspectives into the history that has been accepted as the only “truth”. Further still, New Historicists seek to explore the power relations in the society and how these relations have been embedded in language and how literary works generate subversive insights.

The perceptions of the black presidency are largely told from a historical point of view. Whereas Almustafa speaks of how they “marched, begged, petitioned, and demanded” in celebrating the hope that the election of Barack Obama ushered in America, Michael Eric Dyson criticises Obama’s “racial procrastination” and his tendency to react only when pinned to the “racial corner”.

Taking both theories into consideration, Formalism will enable this study to focus on the organic elements of the texts—and especially the poetry—while New Historicism will

enable this study to look at the power relations and the notions of subversion embedded in the texts and subsequently fill the gap of exploring the literary depictions of the black presidency.

1.8 Methodology

This study is concerned with how the presidency of Barack Obama has been portrayed by Kahlil Almustafa and Michael Eric Dyson. To achieve my goals, my methodology included a close reading of the major primary texts to identify the issues relating to the said presidency and how it has been portrayed. In this study, I also focused on how imagery has been used to narrate Obama's presidency in the two major works: *From Auction Street to Oval Office* and *The Black Presidency*. In *From Auction Street to Oval Office*, I analysed the poetry to show how the poet celebrates the hope that the election of Barack Obama inspired and from what points of view he celebrates this hope. I relied on the Formalist perspective to analyse the form and contents of the poem. New Historicist perspectives enabled this study to give further meaning to the poems by looking at the historical circumstances that may have inspired them. In *The Black Presidency*, I also analysed the prose which is somewhat a biography of the Obama presidency while paying attention to the points of view through which Dyson criticises the said presidency. In this study I also relied on secondary sources to gain more knowledge on the writers, their critics as well as their readers in an effort to gain a wider picture of the two texts under study.

1.9 Chapter Outline

Chapter 1: Introduction

The chapter gives a general introduction to the research, stating the overall aims and objectives to be achieved at the end of the research. It goes further to highlight the scope and limitations of the study as well as the theoretical frameworks that guide this research study.

Chapter 2: A Celebration of Hope in the Poetry of Kahlil Almustafa

In this chapter, I analyse the poetry of Almustafa in a bid to show how he celebrates hope even in the midst of a gloomy world. I use formalist perspectives to analyse the form and the content of the poems and new historicist perspectives to contextualise the poems and make sense of their meanings.

Chapter 3: Dyson's Criticism of Barack Obama's Presidency in *The Black Presidency*

The focus of this chapter is to analyse the language and the feeling of dissatisfaction that emanates from Dyson's criticism of the Obama presidency. While doing this, I also evaluate Dyson's objectivity in expressing his criticisms towards the black presidency.

1.11 Conclusion

This is a general overview of this research project with a specific focus on the major conclusions arrived at as well as suggestions for future research in this area.

CHAPTER 2: A CELEBRATION OF HOPE IN THE POETRY OF KAHLIL ALMUSTAFA

2.0. Introduction

Aristotle in *Poetics* argues that poems serve two functions: they either look up towards high subjects or downwards towards low subjects. In looking up towards high subjects, the poems take the form of praise poetry through which virtues and honourable qualities are singled out by the poet. Aristotle further speaks of *auxesis* which arises when the orator—and poet in this case—praises a real person or thing. The justification for *auxesis* and *auxetic* poetry was so that the reader could be encouraged to uphold the virtuous and shun the vice according to J. A Burrow in *The Poetry of Praise*.

The arguments in this chapter are be driven by Majorie Hope Nicholson’s argument in *The Art of Description* that “description...is the use of various moods and attitudes (what I.A Richards calls feeling in *Practical Criticism*) through which a writer or speaker who has found his world interesting, beautiful, ugly or effective endeavors to transfer others to his pleasure or his interest in that world” (5) in order to show how Almustafa celebrates hope in his poetry.

It is against these backdrops of Aristotle’s *auxetic* and Nicholson’s description that I seek to analyse the poetry of Almustafa as a praise poet of the Obama presidency and uncover how he celebrates the hope that Obama’s election had ushered in the United States. Further still, I address key areas of interest such as identity politics in the depiction of the black presidency, race relations where I focus on how African Americans relate with each other and also how they relate with the Whites seeking to explore how the poet constructs the nuances of race and how meaning is contained and conveyed in his poetry.

I rely on formalist and New Historicist perspectives in this section as I seek to explore how the idea of hope is constructed and celebrated by the poet against a backdrop of racial injustices and suspicion amongst the blacks themselves and also suspicion of the whites. This chapter is therefore concerned with the race relations, how it is manifested in the poetry of Almustafa, and how it justifies the celebration of the hope the presidency of Obama had ushered in America.

2.1. Synopsis of *From Auction Block to Oval Office*

Kahlil Almustafa's *From Auction Block to Oval Office* is a collection of poems written during the first one hundred days of the Obama presidency. It is a collection that captures the hopes and aspirations not only of the Americans but also of the entire world. They are aspirations narrated through the hopeful eyes of an African American taking into account the struggles that African Americans have endured to live to see an African American president. It is a collection of poetry that tries to capture what the Obama presidency means for the African Americans.

2.2. Historical Backdrop and the Celebration of Hope

For us to understand where we are going, we need to understand where we are coming from. To appreciate the sun that shines brightly before us, we need to remind ourselves of the dark days that we survived—the hopelessness that we endured. This seems to be the message of Almustafa refers to when he writes the poem on the first day of the Obama presidency. To understand the image of hope that he paints in the first and second stanza of the poem together with “millions of other hope-filled Americans” (7), the poet reminds the reader the journey that the African American has taken to occupy the Oval Office. The “Auction Block” that the poet alludes to was an old courthouse block from where slaves were sold. The poet seems to tell the reader that indeed, “finally we made it!” It is true that African Americans

had achieved several historical feats which the poet captures in “Day Thirty Nine” of his anthology. The poet, through the persona, notes that “...We have had First Doctor, First Ivy League Graduate. First Black do this or do that...” (50) But occupying the Oval Office in the *White House* seemed the most elusive; the persona’s teacher finds this to be “*something worth mentioning*” (50). Notable African American leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X had been assassinated and others lynched if not brutalized by the police, and an unjust racial system (which I discuss later) and this had instilled a sense of fear in the blacks over the candidacy of Obama and his presidency too.

The journey to achieving this historical reality and the sense of fear is referred to and evident in the poem on the ninth day of the Obama presidency when he writes:

WE dare not say the word

what if they

if they took you?

Where would WE...

Hopes for a better world?

Please stay. (16)

The anxiety of the persona is easily detectable as he asks himself these questions regarding the safety of the “safe, beautiful, young warrior” who is Obama. It is against this backdrop of assassinations and brutalities that the persona foregrounds his relief in seeing the first African American man arrive at the Oval Office by italicizing the last stanza of the poem on the first day of the Obama presidency “*From Auction Block to Oval Office*”. It is on Obama that the hopes for a better world had been placed. His narrative of hope along his campaign trail had

resonated with most Americans who cast their vote in support of him. The poet captures this euphoric hope and sense of achievement as presented by the persona on “Day One” of the presidency when he says that, “Along with millions of other hope-filled Americans...” (7). It is not only him—the poet—who was full of hope but also millions of other Americans.

My argument that a reflection on the progress made makes the celebration of hope much more euphoric and even justified is further strengthened by the persona on the second day of the “black” presidency. The persona takes us back to the time of Martin Luther King Jr and compares his would be celebration of Obama’s victory to the same way he spoke against injustice. The persona notes that “Martin would celebrate this victory and in the same breath speak out against injustice” (8). The persona further points us to a moment that shaped the history of the struggle against racial discrimination in the second stanza when he speaks of the bombing of a church in Alabama in which four little girls were killed. By looking back, we are able to make sense of the present and appreciate that moment much better than we would have had we not looked at the past.

To make sense of the present, the poet further continues his engagement with historical moments that led to the emergence of the black presidency—if not the history of America

This engagement with history and derivation of meaning from it is further evident in the poet’s “Day Five” poem where he, in a rather victorious tone, reminds us of the history of racism, especially the journey of the slave owners from their native lands. The persona of the poem, borrowing from Olaudah Equiano’s slave narrative where he narrates that “The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable” (35) indicates that there is “no memory of women moaning at the bottom of slave ships” (11). Hypotextual in nature, the persona seems to suggest that though they share

the same skin colour with Obama, they do not share the same heritage—the heritage of slavery. By seeming to suggest that there is no memory of slavery in Obama’s DNA the persona points us to Obama’s lineage of a Kenyan father and an American mother. The rather victorious tone referred to earlier in my argument emanates from the persona’s indication that “i am survivor who dares to be a witness” (11). The persona seems to show that he is a survivor of the “firehoses” and “slavery” which are absent in Obama’s DNA. The firehoses in this stanza refer to the methods used by the police to quell demonstrations by African Americans in Alabama, the city of segregation, during the Birmingham campaigns whose main objective was to desegregate Birmingham.

The persona’s engagement with history in order to justify the present is also reflected in the poem on the inauguration day of Barack Obama. The persona, through flashing back to historical moments, reminds the reader that:

Before the voters spoke
the people spoke
we marched
we begged
we petitioned
we demanded (1)

The poet refers to the march from Selma to Montgomery which was used to raise awareness to the issues the African Americans were facing in Alabama, which was a state with deeply entrenched racial policies and prejudices. It was this march that subsequently led to the adoption of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which served to remove the legal obstacles that prevented African Americans from voting and further still allowed for the participation

of African Americans in different levels of governance. The poet reminds the reader that the election of Obama did not just happen but was made to happen through the tireless efforts of the civil rights movement that shaped and paved the way for his candidacy and his presidency.

To quell any lingering thoughts that the election of Obama signaled the end of the struggle for the African Americans, the poet reminds the reader that “The shift is ahead. This is a beginning” (1). In as much as those who came before them “marched, begged, petitioned, and demanded” the poet invites us to the realization that much has been done but there is still more to be done. The poet echoes Obama’s victory speech upon his election as the first African American President when he states that, “The road ahead will be long. Our climb will be steep...but...we as a people will get there.” (1)

It is indeed true that the dreams and aspirations of many African Americans had come true with the election of Obama, and this caused an arguably euphoric moment for them bearing in mind the historical injustices they had to endure to get where they got on that night when he was declared the president-elect of the United States. Just like the president on the election night, the poet reminds the reader that “true battles await” (1). Though we are allowed the pleasure of savouring the moment, we cannot risk living in it. This moment is in a way symbolic of the biblical journey from Egypt to Canaan for the Israelites. Martin Luther King Jr. declared that he had seen the Promised Land and though he never lived to get there his dream that someday they would get to the Promised Land came to pass with the election of Obama.

To muster the hope that the election of Obama ushered in, we must understand the disillusionment that was there not only during the periods of slavery and the civil rights movements but also just before his election. We need to have a glimpse of the historical to have a concrete picture and full appreciation of the present. This is actually evident in

Almustafa's letter to the president which comes after his inauguration. He begins by expressing his regret in not writing the letter sooner. "It has taken me some time to write this letter. It probably should have come sooner..." he writes. My argument on this is that Almustafa was quite apprehensive of Obama becoming the president. He was not sure whether Obama would have made it to the White House—whether they would have let him. These fears are evident in his ninth day poem when he writes "what if they took you... Who would keep our secret hopes for a better world?" These lingering questions born out of knowing what happened to the African American leaders of the past are what kept him from writing the letter on time as he had desired. He waited until Obama's inauguration was evident that Obama was president albeit for barely a day—it still counted for something whether they "took him" then or not.

What is it about you and this moment which inspires such profound hope?" This, I believe is one of the most profound questions that the poet asks himself in his address to the president

Earlier on Almustafa overcomes his hopelessness and how the Obama family makes it "worthwhile to bring children into this weary world" (3).

Reading this letter to the president reveals the author's disillusionment with the past and the systems that governed it. It is a disillusionment that led the author and other Americans to "trade their patriotism a long time ago" and consider themselves "citizens of the world" (4). It was better to consider oneself a citizen of the world other than an American where one lived a life of dodging bullets. The dodging of bullets evidently refers to staying away from the police officers due to their characteristic brutality against the African Americans.

With this letter, Almustafa captures his frustrations, if not the frustrations of the entire African American race, which has been driven to the point of invisibility—he captures this by asking the president if at all he knows they exist. "Barack, do you even know we exist?"

(3)—and losing their identity in trying to live within the unjust system. The identity and patriotism of the African American is pegged on wearing the American flag pin if not a “prison identification number, or a basketball, or a diamond studded necklace branded to their skin.” These elements of identification are characteristic of the African American youth. It is factual that most, if not all jails, in the United States are disproportionately populated by inmates of African American descent.

It is in the same conciliatory tone which the poet starts with that he finishes his letter. This time he ceases referring to the president by his name, Barack, and instead refers to him as “brother.” The poet seemingly concludes by acknowledging that indeed they belong together; that their fates are tied together even though Barack is now the president. He captures this realization by stating that, “I am sorry dear brother. I did not mean to speak from this place, but this is where I am. And we each can only be where we can be” (5). The poet wishes that maybe he could have written to his “brother” from a better place, from a place where he could not vent his frustrations with the system that has killed countless black men that he grew up with or incarcerated them. The place he is at is a place filled with the thoughts of the brutality that the African Americans went through at the hands of their slavers—public castrations and lynching. This is the place he wishes he was not at as he writes this letter to his “brother” but he concedingly acknowledges that they each can only be where they can be and regardless of this separation and difference, regardless of the dark shadow that the past has cast over him, he wants his “brother” to know that he has forever changed him by making him more hopeful than he was earlier. That the change Obama imagined “is here and it is real” (5).

The gloom that had engulfed the poet at the beginning and also throughout the letter is erased by the conclusion that he is now a man forever changed. He seems not only to have reached the light at the end of the tunnel but also reached the source of that light. This idea of

change that had seemed elusive and more of an illusion than the reality finally descends on Almustafa. The dream that had been born “not in the halls of Washington but began in the backyards of Des Moines and the living rooms of Concord and the front porches of Charleston” (1) had come true not only for the President who is in this case a “brother” to the poet but also to millions of Americans. It is against this backdrop of miscarried dreams for the blacks in America and years of living on the peripheries of the American system that we get to understand and appreciate the hope that the election of Obama had rekindled in the African Americans. They somewhat felt that they belonged; that they also had a share of the American dream and most importantly, that they could also dream.

Hope is an intangible object; though we may have it, we cannot hold it or even describe what it looks like; but often times we can have representations of hope that are visible and can be held. Though Americans who beheld the election of Barack Obama could not hold the hope which he rekindled in them—and also hold him due to the fact that he was the president—they could, however, have representations of him with them that reminded them of the hope that was visible and tangible. The excitement at the rekindling of this hope is evident in the poet’s poem on the third day of the Obama presidency. The excited tone of the persona is nearly tangible. The poet writes:

the dolls are coming—
the Obamas—collect
the whole set:
michelle, barack, (9)

The use of the word “dolls” in this stanza is used to show how precious the Obama family is to the persona’s family. By referring to the Obamas as the dolls, the persona

seemingly reveals not only how excited his family is but also how they cherish the Obama family.

This kind of excitement is captured in *What Obama Means* by Jabari Asim when he records what his mother's house had been turned into. He half-jokingly refers to it as an Obama shrine due to the Obama memorabilia that had been collected therein. Though they could not own Obama, they all wanted to own a piece of him and subsequently a piece that reminded them of the moment they had lived to witness. By writing, "Limited time offer." (9), the poet paints a picture of buyers who were in a rush to own the first family and all that came with them. After collecting "...michelle and barack", it is the kids and the dog that were being collected next. Everything "Obama" inspired hope to the persona. Having a representation of him was close enough to having him—Obama.

J. Paul Hunter in *The Norton Introduction to Poetry* argues that "poetry often deals with beauty and the softer, more attractive human emotions...seeks to mirror human emotions and human events" (37). This is arguably true of the poetry of Almustafa who shows his excitement over the election of Obama through poetry. Hunter continually argues that poetry could also deal with "ugliness and less attractive" human behaviour. The emotion of hope and excitement that the Obama presidency brought is mirrored by the poet against a backdrop of what I would call hopelessness that was propagated by decades of racial discrimination and police brutality.

The excitement and the beauty of the persona's emotions are further mirrored in the poem on the sixth day of the Obama presidency. The persona, while in his house, wakes up with what he calls the "Barack Obama swagger" (12). We find a reflection of the swagger on the twenty-first day of the when the persona describes Obama as a man with a "coooooo calm demeanour" and a "smooth-ass walk" (30). Further still, the Obama swagger is depicted when the persona kisses his wife and scans the day's news on the sixth day and then he

proceeds to hit his “desk without missing a beat.” He is in a lively mood on this day as he runs his errands through the day.

Unlike in his letter to the president where the persona had adopted a more resigned tone, he, on this day, is more upbeat and ready to take on the world. It is with the same tone that he approaches the next day. The persona on the seventh day declares that what was considered an election was not but rather “a pep-rally for imperialism” (13). Jukka Gronow in *Imperialism as the Last Stage of Capitalism* argues that “power is the new decisive factor in imperialism, and relations of power and dominance replace relations of a purely economic character in imperialism.” (127). This taken into consideration, it is evident that the persona in the poem celebrates the would-be ascendance of the United States as the global super-power. He somewhat calls to mind the British imperialism that saw it colonise most countries in the world. Though the poet might not be alluding to this kind of imperialism, he seemingly hopes for the day when the United States would dominate globally following the election of Obama. The persona’s excitement with the prospects of America’s imperialism under Obama is also evident on the eighteenth day of the presidency when he laments that his ‘brotha’ never got inspired after he told him about “Racism, Imperialism, Neo-imperialism...” (26). The persona laments:

This one brotha’ told me
Barack Obama is the first person
he heard speak who inspired hi,
to want to make a difference

What the fuck!?

i guess ME telling him...
didn’t get him inspired (26).

The persona's tone is evidently a frustrated one because he has not been able to do what Obama did to his friend—inspire him. It is quite ironical since the persona spends time with his friend and therefore had more opportunities to inspire him but he never did probably due to his lack the charm and charisma that Obama bears. Obama on the other end inspired him even though they never had a one on one engagement. The persona's "brotha" only heard him speak and got inspired to make a difference. This frustration is foregrounded by the capitalisation of 'ME' which serves to highlight his importance in his friend's life. The frustration is further evident in the persona's question at the end of the first stanza when he asks himself "What the fuck!?" (26) Because his 'brotha' was never inspired by his lectures on various subjects such as racism which they have to deal with every day as described by the poet on the tenth day of his poetry, "we deal with race intimately every single day" (17).

The centrality of race in African American literature and even life is something that cannot be ignored. Arguably and symbolically, it is the umbilical cord that though it is cut at birth, the scar remains as a permanent reminder of where we once belonged. Even though it does not drive everyday conversations it somehow drives everyday interactions. This, I believe, is what the persona implies when he says that they deal with race "intimately." That is how close the subject and experience of race is to them. The persona on the thirtieth day writes a letter to the president where he aptly captures this struggle with racism. In a calm tone, the persona identifies with the President as his brother and confides in him that he knows how it feels to have all his choices measured by the colour of his skin. As though to encourage him, he says, "i have fought against it. i have learnt from it. It has shaped me" (41). In as much as one struggles to identify oneself as a human being first in the American society, the racial tag is not shed off completely or even that easily. One has to fight against these nuances of discrimination and learn from them for they will shape who one becomes and even what one does. Failure to fight and learn from this discrimination breaks one. This

is clearly evident on the twenty second day of the poems where the persona notes that he “walks down boulevards of broken black men...hall of mirrors which haunts me” (31). The fight against racial discrimination and profiling is one that the persona seems to imply is not for the faint-hearted. Those who are broken are not only men but also black men. The emphasis on their identity foregrounds those affected. They are probably broken by the pressures of the unjust racial system. The hall of mirrors that haunts the persona reminds him that he too is one of those broken men. The mirror reflects his image, though he walks down this boulevard of broken black men, he sees his reflection in the mirrors along the hall.

This image of the boulevard as a place of torment for the African American is further reinforced on the twenty-fourth day when the persona wonders whether one day young black boys will be “gunned down on Barack Obama Blvd.” (33) The embodiment of the African American’s hope also becomes the bearer of their fears. The persona does not hide his admiration for Obama and what he means not only for him but also the entire American community. He further still cannot help but wonder whether one day, if at all a boulevard is named after Obama, young African American boys will meet their death on this boulevard of the man who once inspired hope in them.

It is on the fifteenth day that the poet in a rather pensive mood paints to us the picture of police brutality against African Americans in the United States. In the previously discussed poems we can only imagine the idea of a young African American man being gunned down on “Barack Obama Blvd” but on this day we actually experience the actual murder of a young black man by the police on the streets of New York. Amadou Diallo, who is the subject of discussion by the persona on this day, was shot at 41 times by the police on suspicion of being an armed serial rapist. The police were acquitted by a jury. Diallo was neither a rapist nor was he armed on the day of his murder. He was only a man trying to make a living by selling “socks, gloves and videotapes on the New York City streets” (23). Being

an immigrant from Guinea, he must have been attracted by the American dream, that he too could make it in the land of opportunities; that his story could also count at some point. All the hopes and dreams this 23 year-old African American man had were snuffed out brutally by the police on that fateful fourth day of February, 1999.

The persona's pensiveness is captured by his use of the phrase "if only" repetitively. The phrase transmits feelings of hopes dashed, a bright future lost, a "commitment to change" never seen. The persona links Diallo's story to that of Obama. The undertone in this poem is that both share a similar story only that they took different paths in life. The persona, while addressing Amadou, wonders what would have been the case had he been from Kenya and not from Guinea. "Amadou, if only you had been from Kenya and not from Guinea" (23) he wonders. Maybe if Amadou had been from Kenya and not from Guinea his story would have been different. Diallo's fate is arguably the fate of many young African American men; it is the unfortunate fate of having "all your life choices measured by your melanin" (41). It is the unfortunate fate that unlike the poet, many African American men don't live long enough to fight against. It is the fate of "having an abusive lover who beats you and beats you and beats you and then buys you nice things" (38). The "nice things" in this case is the election of Barack Obama. Diallo never sold hope on TV screens neither was his name synonymous to hope. Just like the persona in the poem, we can only wonder "if only" the four police officers who murdered him saw his commitment to change instead of a "gun."

Hunter in *The Norton Introduction to Poetry* argues that "the whole spirit of the poem may be difficult to appreciate unless one knows its circumstances" (289) which are the circumstances under which the poem was written. The poetry of Almustafa is heavily steeped on historical events and moments. It would be right to argue that he draws his strength from the history of the African American struggle to write his poetry. The history on which he leans gives his personas and himself a justifiable reason to celebrate the hope that Obama

ushered in as he became the first African American president and probably the “last First” because his election was the ultimate achievement for the African American community and no other “first” would match this.

2.3. Structure, Content, and the Embodiment of Hope

The structure of a poem not only contributes to the general—and the specific meaning—of a poem but also to the mood. Paul Hunter argues that often times poets reach for a structure that suits the moment. In so doing, I argue, the poet creates a style of writing from which meaning can be derived upon close analysis. The poetry of Almustafa serves the purpose of celebrating and embodying the hope that the election of Obama ushered in the United States. In doing so the poet creates a style of “narrating” his poetry so that one gets a sense of the euphoria and anxiety at some moments. In this section, I will closely analyse the poetry that contributes to the focus of this section which is how the form and content of the poetry embody hope.

On the fortieth day of the Obama presidency, the poet records that:

There is a Black Woman
in the White House. We have a First. (53)

In light of this first stanza alone, it is rightly arguable that what the poet alludes to makes perfect sense. The meaning deduced from this first stanza is that there is a first black woman in the House who is the first lady. This idea of having a “First” is also repeated earlier in the poet’s collection when he points out that “Barack Obama—the First Black President” (50). The idea of having a first black woman First Lady contributes to the general celebration of hope in the poetry of Almustafa. It is true that the first stanza sets the pace towards meaning derivation from the ensuing stanzas which like the first, have only two verses.

In the second stanza of this poem the persona paints a picture of the “First” that he had alluded to in the preceding stanza by noting that the First:

Lady who finds a humble pride
at hearing the name Sojourner (53)

It is only in reading the final stanza that we realise that the persona is referring to Sojourner Truth. The First Lady finds humble pride at hearing this name. The poet seems to suggest that in a way the First Lady finds a sense of belonging in Mrs Truth, that they both share a similar heritage—that of slavery. I argue this to be the implied meaning because the question that I ask myself is that “Didn’t the previous first ladies find humble pride at hearing the name Sojourner Truth?” This foregrounds the argument on belonging. It is while engaging with these historical figures that the persona reveals to us that the first lady has “wept” and “laughed” as she found some a sense of belonging and likeness in them. The different types of emotion that the first lady goes through are reminiscent of the struggle of the African Americans who “wept” and “laughed” in pursuit of their happiness as entrenched in the American Declaration of Independence. The African American struggle had somewhat come to full circle with the election of Obama to the highest office in America.

The two-verse-stanza technique that the poet uses in this poem reveals a more patient tone within the persona. Everything the persona says matters and that is why the poet splits it to two verses. The persona is no rush to tell the reader about the “Black Woman” in the “White House.” It is definitely something worth mentioning. The persona gives us time to comprehend what he says before introducing us to the next stanza where he also repeats the same technique. The patient and serious tone with this technique is reminiscent of the poem on the twenty-second day where the persona walks down “boulevards of broken black men” (31). I believe that the persona uses stanzas with two verses to express matters that are

weighty to him and even to the African Americans. This argument is further cemented in the poem on the ninth day where the persona reflects on what would happen if they “took” Barack Obama. Taking, in this case, means assassinating him. The questions that the persona asks himself reveal the heaviness of not only his heart but also the issue itself.

if they took you

Where would WE

place our possibilities?

Who would keep our secret

hopes for a better world? (16)

It is in Obama that the secret hopes for a better world of the persona and his ilk are kept. It is in Obama that all the possibilities are kept. At this point, one can only imagine the expectations inspired by the President. It is in him that the hope of humanity lies—at least according to the persona.

The poet’s use of poems with two stanzas is continued further on the thirty-fifth day. On this day, the persona of the poem narrates to us the “story” of a lady who is in love with Obama. In a rather light tone the persona warns the reader never to talk bad about a man whom a woman loves:

When a woman is this much in love

you better not speak bad about her man (46)

The woman in this poem is a metaphor for the African Americans who loved Obama to the extent that they saw no fault in his actions. It is evident in the poem that Obama was shutting down illegal torture prisons and as he did that he missed closing some. The persona

also suggests that he should also have found the culprits guilty. While the persona notes the faults that “Barack” had while carrying out his duties, he, in a way, warns the reader not to indulge in speaking about them. This spirit of loving him to a fault is captured in the poem on the twenty-sixth day when the persona wonders to whom would they complain now that the “MAN is a Brotha” (37). In Obama they saw themselves, they saw a man who embodied their hopes and dreams and who shared their secrets. By voting for him, they voted for victory for the first time. Having a “brotha” as the president was a taste of how victory felt after “hard, long bloody Sundays, weary footed, arms linked...and song sewn into our mouths” (120). After every embodiment of the American dream had failed, Obama, being the president, was their achievement; though a national and historic achievement, this was as well a personal achievement.

The poet also speaks of the American dream on Day Forty-One of his collection. The persona in this poem honours an American dream that is not his but his grandmother’s. The American dream instilled in him by the grandmother was a dream of:

the basics of citizenship: reading,
writing, learning, voting, paying taxes... (54)

Using the same technique of two verses per stanza, the persona speaks of a dream that is nothing more than just living an ordinary life. The American cannot dream of much other than just taking the beaten path. This is the dream the persona’s grandmother instilled in him. It is the dream that he fulfils to perfection that would make his Grandma proud. Other than fulfilling his grandmother’s American dream to perfection, the persona also has an urge for something more. My argument for this passion for something more is that the “Obama effect” makes him believe that he could achieve something too other than just paying taxes on time and voting. The persona, after achieving his grandmother’s American dream and abiding by

the “basics of citizenship” points out that he has “built my own home of citizenship—educated & willing to fight for justice.” (54).

In this “home of citizenship” that the persona has built he can also instill the values of citizenship to his children and possibly grandchildren. That instead of just reading, writing, and learning, they would be educated and willing to fight for justice. While justice in this sense may be rightly construed to mean the fight against racial inequality, I do believe that the persona, aware of the challenges faced by the world when he refers to the “threat-of-global-climate-change” (26) also means that fighting for justice will include fighting for environmental justice—which in this case means taking care of the environment. The poet furthers his theme of environmental conservation with his poem on Day Sixty-Three. The persona in this poem, in a rather sarcastic tone, carries his canvas bag to the grocery store so that when the cashier gives him a plastic bag, he would smile and tell him “*No thank you I have my own*” (79). By doing this, the persona believes that he would have saved a polar bear. “Somewhere in my mind i’ve told myself not using this one bag will somehow save a polar bear” (79) the persona proudly admits. The hope that Obama transmitted to the Americans not only ends with them but they also seek to channel it to the conservation of the environment.

This idea of environmental conservation is further evident on the sixty-fifth day. The persona in this poem wonders whether it is the freedoms that America provides that have led to the oceans being filled with “plastic bottles, plastic toys, plastic pens...and barrels-full of unsolved scientific equations” (81). This, in a way, echoes the American arrogance that the president chastises America for a day earlier. The persona on that day notes that “President Obama said in a press conference that America has been arrogant” (80). The persona agrees with the chastisement and had even echoed it earlier using the same form of two lines verse whenever he wants to say something that he considers serious. The persona notes that:

i do not think that America is the best
and continuously telling me... (76)

It would be presumptuous to say that the persona agrees with the president because he is a “brotha”. The persona in this instance exercises an independence of thought just as he has done before and has not failed to point the wrong when it comes to his country. The persona on Day Eighty-Four, just like the President, “speaks to U.S. as if we are adults” (106). The persona hopes that the President speaking to them like adults will help “U.S. finally grow up” (106) with the U.S in this case meaning both the country and also his black folk

The hopes that the persona embodies are not only limited to racial justice and environmental conservation but also extend to the future of the American nation. He hopes that the Americans grow up since the President treats them as such. The image of America being a bully and a selfish child is portrayed on Day Fifty-Seven. The persona wonders that:

If America were a kid
in kindergarten, would we
tell her to share her crayons...

At what point would we tell America
to go sit on the carpet
and take a time-out (73)

In a contemplative mood, the persona reveals America’s selfishness and what a bully she is. Unfortunately, no one knows when America would be told to sit on the carpet and take a time-out—which is a form of punishment or chastisement when dealing with children. The persona does not relent on the hope that maybe someday America will grow up. This

relentless hopefulness of the persona is evident throughout the poems. He places his hope on the survival of humanity even in the midst of a recession. On Day Fourteen, the poet and the persona using the same technique of two stanzas per poem hopes that “maybe...the value of people will be on the rise” (21) as the dollar declines. The persona implies that people had placed a premium on the dollar to the extent that they neglected their fellow humans—people were devalued so to speak. The declining dollar gives people the chance to set things right by valuing people.

The persona’s engagement with hope and the two stanzas per poems is further evidenced earlier on Day Four when the persona hopes that “Barack Obama’s presidency will help my family accept my wife” (10). Earlier on in the text, the persona reveals to the reader that he had to convince his friends to attend his wedding rather than listen to Obama’s keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention—the two coincided. The persona pins the hope of his marriage on the election of the president. However far-fetched or odd this might seem, it serves to show the level of hope that the president inspired in the persona. He proceeds to state that “Maybe they will be able to imagine the possibility of a genuine Black/White love relationship” (10). The undertones here are that such a relationship could never be imagined. It is through Obama that the persona hopes this imagination could dawn in the minds of his family members. On Day Seventy One, the persona reveals to us that his wife is a “mutt” (one who is in between, neither black nor white) just like Obama. “Like you (Obama) she finds her face at the intersection of many identities” (89). The persona seems to hopefully suggest in his earlier poem that since his family accepted Obama and imagined the possibility of a Black man in the White House then they (his family) will also accept his wife since she has so much in common with the President. With the repetition of the phrase “like you” in this poem, the persona draws us to the similarities between the president and his wife.

They both have battled the “either/or Black-or-White lines trying to dissect her” and they both live in the “both/and-neither claiming all of who she is” (89).

Michelle Obama on the unveiling of her portrait at the National Portrait Gallery says that:

...I think about all of the young people who will visit the National Portrait Gallery and see this, including so many young girls and young girls of color who don't often see their images displayed in beautiful and iconic ways. I am so proud to help make that kind of history. (1)

It is arguably true that having Obama as the president had an impact on the lives of Americans and especially African Americans. By looking at him, they could find a new sense of hope and belief in themselves—that they too, despite the racial prejudices that they face, could amount to something greater. The poet captures this in his letter to Obama by noting that “...you have forever changed me.” (5) Obama being the president does not, however, overshadow the effect that Michelle had and still has on the African American women. A close analysis of the poetry of Almustafa reveals the effect she had on the African American women.

“My grandma would have flipped through the pages of that man...writings until she found the one word she was looking for, *Michelle*” (60). It is quite interesting that the persona in this poem does not mention Obama, a man he has adored in the previous poems. One might rightly argue that he—Obama— is the focus and therefore no need to mention him but the sudden shift of adoration from him is notable. He goes ahead to refer to him as “that man” which is somehow condescending. The perception herein is that Obama fades in comparison to the light *Michelle* sheds on the persona's grandma.

The image of the persona's grandma flipping through the pages of “that man's” writing until she found the *one word* she was looking for reflects the level of adoration she

has for *Michelle*. It is a perception that casts the image of determination and relief. In the midst of thousands of words in the president's writings, she looks for only one word—Michelle. The persona further tells us that Michelle was the daughter his mother never was; she “got good grades, went to a good university...” (60).

That the persona's grandmother would invite her daughter for tea and tell her about the “*latest greatest of our First Lady*” (60) is quite unfathomable! This implies that she would always keep abreast of all Michelle did so that she would tell her daughter about it. It is at this point that I conclude by agreeing with Hunter's argument that “...however words can be satisfying, they are never an equivalent for life itself and its human experiences.” (7) However much we can create mental images of the persona's grandmother and empathise with her, we can never experience what she did and feel what she felt. The persona's choice of words only bring us close to the experience but not to the experience itself.

The poet, through the persona, has lamented about America's ignorance and selfishness in his poems. As discussed earlier, this he has also depicted on Day Fifty of his collection. The poet characterises America as an “economy of greed, a politics carried by fear...threatens our generation and makes failure inevitable” (65). Seemingly, the poet is not proud of America. This argument that the persona is not proud of America is reinforced on Day Forty-Six when he admits “i am still not proud of this my America” (59). This gloom is however doused when the persona speaks of Michelle—sister. He finds the assurance he cannot find in America in the First Lady whom he says was “fabulous before the world had the opportunity to meet you” (59). The persona seems to swear an allegiance he cannot swear to America to Michelle who is seemingly greater than the United States. In her, he not only finds a sister but a compatriot, someone to behold and look up to in a nation that he cannot look up to. The persona declares that even if the country took more than two centuries to recognise the existence of Michelle, she “would still be all the way fly” (59). The persona

finds his hope in the First Lady whom he earlier describes as a different type of a queen from the one he grew up knowing. The queen the persona grew up knowing, he points out, was one full of “please-me and Pomp & Circumstance” (58). Michelle is a different kind of royalty, one to be beheld. A Queen whose royalty “flows from a river ancient.” (58). The persona in this poem associates the First Lady with some sort of mystery. Michelle is elevated to the position of a goddess who can only be worshipped. She challenges all of the persona’s preconceived notions and gives him a new perspective. He concludes by indicating that for them to serve Michelle they “only need to hold our heads high the way you do” (59). Michelle contrasts with the queen he grew up knowing who wanted to be pleased and was served with pomp and circumstance. To serve Michelle, they *only* need to hold their heads high the way she does.

Michelle embodies the hopes of not only the old, represented by the persona’s Grandma, but also the young—male and female alike. She, unlike Obama who inspires hope by being the president, inspires hope by being both the First Lady and also a goddess who does not demand much but confidence when serving her. Michelle is all she wants to be; she is “cool, sunny days, warms breezy nights” and can even be the “hurricanes if she has to” (62).

2.4. Style and the Embodiment of Hope

We may contend that the hope embodied in the poetry of Almustafa is mainly derived from the content of his poetry as discussed earlier. This assertion may be true to some extent but then it would not have considered the various aspects of the poetry of Almustafa that embody and transmit his idea of hope to the reader. In this section, I will situate Almustafa as a Harlem Renaissance poet by looking at how he employs style that conforms to the various aesthetics of Harlem Renaissance poetry especially the folk and the proletarian

aesthetics. Sharon Lynette Jones in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry* fronts the argument that folk aesthetics “features the black vernacular... dialect, and an emphasis on the oral tradition and a working-class perspective” (198). Further still, the proletarian aesthetic “critiques class, gender, and racial oppression. Suggesting...folk perspectives; proletarian literature seeks to promote social justice and equality for African Americans in direct and overt manners” (198). It is with this understanding that I discuss the use of style and the embodiment of hope in the poetry of Almustafa in this section.

A reading of the poetry of Almustafa reveals the understanding that there is power in unity. It reveals that in identifying with the group one finds more strength than in identifying as an individual. The poet somehow conforms to the assertion that “i am weak but WE are strong”. One of the most consistent features in his poem is the use of the small i which is in contravention to the rules of grammar. Ideally, the “i” would be in capital since it is a pronoun used to refer to one’s self. The poet capitalises the word “WE” in some instances in his poetry. This he does to summon what I would call the collective spirit of the African American in the face of their daily struggles. The poet’s deviation from the rules of grammar calls the reader to attention to the thematic concerns in his poetry. This contributes to the wholesome understanding of his poetry and the contextualisation of the meaning embodied in each in light of the celebration of hope.

One of the most candid aspects of folk aesthetics in the poetry of Almustafa is the use of the word “Brotha” and “Sista” in reference to either Michelle or Barack Obama respectively. By doing this the poet not only enforces the folk aesthetic argument but also seeks to show his relationship with the President. The persona on Day Twenty Six asks “Now who do we complain about now that The Man is a Brotha” (37). One might wonder how this “Brotharing” of Obama embodies hope and the argument would be that the persona finds some sort of belonging with Obama. This belonging is not one announced from the rooftops

but one shared secretly. It is the kind of belonging that somehow whispers to the persona and Obama that they both belong. The persona reinforces this belief on Day Eight Three when he notes that when he looks at President Obama he cannot help but feel that they “share a secret somewhere” (105). This is a secret kept between two ‘brothas’ and though we cannot claim to know it, we could presume that it is the secret pride in the capability of the African American; that they too could occupy the highest office in the United States.

In him, the persona sees a man beyond chastisement and a man who has shared in his struggles and overcome them as I had discussed earlier. The poet further reinforces this belonging argument on Day Twenty One. Following the same folk aesthetic argument, the persona in an address to Obama tells him that “Barack you know you is magic Negro...but only we can call you that” (30). The statement itself defies the rules of grammar and in doing so not only reveals the black aesthetics but also the identification the persona finds with Obama. It is only they who can refer to Obama as a Negro and this they can never do in public. The persona, in a somewhat protective tone, seems to infer that they belong to a special group; that the language they speak is theirs and cannot be used in public. This tone and style is also evident on Day Seventeen when the persona feels the need to chastise African Americans who act contrary to his “moral codes”. The persona takes Obama’s success and failure personally and as such he finds himself looking at “Black men with different eyes thinking things like *Act right fool, don’t you know we got a Black president!*” (25) I believe the poet italicises the persona’s thoughts in a bid to foreground the importance of his message. In doing so, the poet not only succeeds in achieving the aforementioned objective but also he succeeds in portraying the folk aesthetic of the Harlem Renaissance poetry. This engagement with italicisation as style and the folk aesthetics is further evident in the poet’s description of Michelle whom he says could say “*brotha get your act right* in five different dialects” (55). The idea of “brothas” getting their acts right seems to suggest that for

Obama's legacy to remain intact, then fellow African Americans need to behave appropriately according to the persona. In as much Obama represents them, they also represent him and as such, they should not engage in behaviours that bring shame upon 'The Man' and themselves. The persona, as argued earlier, assumes the role of a watchdog so as to safeguard this precious reputation bestowed upon a fellow "brotha".

The proletariat aesthetic and the use of style is evident in the persona's struggle against racial prejudices and his idolisation of women. The persona on Day Ten reveals an encounter with an African American girls who seek to know the colour of his wife probably because she—the persona's wife—is a mutt (one who is in between, neither black nor white). The persona refers to the girl as "sista" which reveals the folk aesthetic. The "sista" asks the persona, "*is your girl white and is you down with post-racial shit?*"(17). This question is littered with what I earlier referred to as African American dialect. Post-racial debates arose after the election Obama as the president of the United States whereby critics foresaw the possibility of an America without racial biases and injustices. This was quite a hopeful expectation in a country whose history has been shaped by the racial struggles and largely continues to be shaped by it. The persona, in answering the "sista", confirms that his "girl" is white and that they are "not down" with the "post-racial shit". Being down, in this case, means believing that they live in a country free from racial prejudices. Though the election of Obama did not usher in a post-racial America, it did give them an opportunity to critically relook at the subject of race relations in the United States.

On Day Ninety-Three, the poet records that, "When i look at The Obamas i see love" (155). The persona further believes that Michelle truly loves Obama and neither does she shine on Barack's shelf—an implication that she is not a trophy wife to Barack but rather a companion. The persona in this instance seemingly concedes that the Obama's represent a greater ideal to humanity. He cannot consider himself an equal to them and as such he can

only remain or make himself smaller by using the small i for them to appear **great** as they are.

2.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, the arguments constructed have spanned across how history embodies and justifies the celebration of hope in the poetry of Almustafa to how the style the poet uses carries within it the hope that the election of Obama ignited within the African Americans. It would be unjust to say that the poet only paints a glorious picture of America under Obama because he does not. Almustafa invites us to the beautiful and the ugly America under Obama. This he does by reflecting on the journey the African Americans have taken to be where they are at the moment he writes his poems and by revealing to us that the struggle is not yet over. It has been quite an eventful journey that began on slave ships, to plantations; a journey of bus boycotts and tireless marches, a journey of police brutality and the assassination of their leaders.

One of the arguments that could arise from the poetry of Almustafa is: is there any fairness in his celebration of the hope that the election of Obama ushered in? This is due to the fact that he is black just like Obama and this could blind him from being objective. My argument is that it is true that the poet finds it hard criticising Obama but he confesses it when he points out that “who do we complain about now that The Man is a brotha” (37). Though the poet does not outright criticise the president he portrays both the beautiful and the ugly that happen under his presidency. The poet in a way argues that the election of Obama as the president did not mark the end of the struggles that the African Americans face in the United States but rather presented them with a new opportunity to believe and keep on fighting for justice and equal treatment of the African Americans. This is the hope that the poet has been

celebrating in his poetry; it is a renewed sense of hope in the belief of African Americans and in their struggle and by doing this the poet remains fair and justified in his celebration.

CHAPTER 3: DYSON'S CRITICISM OF BARACK OBAMA'S PRESIDENCY IN *THE BLACK PRESIDENCY*

3.0. Introduction

The assumption of public office comes with many expectations for it. The office that Obama occupied for eight years was different from any political office in terms of the expectations bestowed upon him. Conservative whites were skeptical about the African American occupying the most powerful office in the world, and some Jews were apprehensive of his Islamic name—Hussein—if not heritage, African Americans saw a man who would liberate them from the stranglehold of racism whereas, others thought he was not black enough.

The expectations laid upon Obama by the African Americans are synonymous with the expectations the Jews had about the Davidic Messiah—a Messiah from the lineage of King David. The Jews had endured a history of oppression from the Romans and their captors to the point that they associated the messiah not as someone who would liberate them spiritually but physically and subsequently usher in a period of justice and peace. They anticipated a conquering messiah as opposed to a divine messiah. Simply put, the Israelites expected a saviour who would lead them to war against their captors and restore their kingdom as opposed to one who preached peace and forgiveness—turning the other cheek.

The question that would arise from this is why do I draw parallels between the election of Obama and the coming of the messiah? The counter argument I would make is that both though not equal in stature had enormous expectations bestowed upon them by the people from their heritage—the Jews and African Americans respectively. In Obama, African Americans saw a man who would revisit the decades of racial injustice and justly bring an end to it. They expected a revolutionary president, but as it turned out he was more pragmatic

than they had anticipated. While these expectations were justified, some were unmet and this left a bitter taste in the mouths of those who had high expectations about the presidency of Obama. Dyson, I argue, is one of them and as such he pens his dissatisfaction with the presidency in his book *The Black Presidency*.

In this chapter therefore, I analyse how the feeling of dissatisfaction has been presented by Dyson and from which angles he presents it. In doing this, I will look at the language and especially his choice of words and the attitudes they transmit as I rely on both the formalist and new historicist perspective to draw meaning from his book and anchor my arguments.

3.1. Synopsis of Dyson's *The Black Presidency*

The Black Presidency by Dyson is a book that talks about the presidency of Barack Obama. In this book, Dyson comments on various subjects, through the lens of race, that Obama had to deal with. They are in-depth essays that paint a picture of how the first black presidency was and the challenges the president faced and how he dealt with them. It is a book that reflects Dyson's attitude towards the Obama administration and how it handled the issue of racial inequality. It is arguably the most insightful book on the race relations during the age of Obama since as the author puts it, it is a book that "Began the night Barack Obama Won the Presidency on November 4, 2008..." (275).

3.2 Images of the African American in *The Black Presidency*

As argued in the previous chapter, the candidacy and presidency of Obama elicited mixed reactions not only among the Americans but also citizens of various countries around the world. The election was a moment that initiated conversations about the possibility of a post-racial America however premature that was. This was also a moment that injected new hope among the African Americans who had questioned whether they were part of the

American country and whether the Declaration of Independence really had them in mind. Simply put, the election of Obama ushered in a new dawn. It would not be farfetched to compare Obama's presidency to the literary phenomenon of urban landscapes in African American literature. Urban landscapes, or the city in literature, were seen as places of renewed hope, deliverance, and even opportunities for better lives by some. The cities were also centres of corruption and violence which subsequently induced a sense of alienation among the blacks. The cities also defined what was meant by black consciousness and American nationness. Obama's presidency by and large embodied some of these elements as argued in the previous chapter of this study. It was a presidency that ushered in an anticipatory feeling of renewal, hope amongst the Americans, and even deliverance to some. Still, the Obama presidency was not without instances of racial injustice and violence against the blacks. These were moments that invoked memories of what it meant to be black and in America; they were moments that initiated debates on black consciousness through national movements such as "Black Lives Matter" which protested police brutality against the blacks, racial profiling, and racial injustice. Dyson, in portraying the Obama presidency, reverts to a tradition of writing within African American literature commonly referred to as a jeremiad which is usually a piece of writing in which the writer laments over the state of the society in which he lives. I intend to show that Dyson's *The Black Presidency* is a jeremiad since he laments of the racial inequality that has plagued the African American society. In this section, my arguments will be based on how Dyson paints the image of the African American in the United States and the challenges they face. Combined with the expectations the blacks had of the Obama presidency, these expectations would arguably justify Dyson's frustration with the Obama administration.

After the murder of Trayvon Martin, a young African American boy, Obama expressed his empathy with the parents by pointing out that if he had a son he would

definitely look like Trayvon. Obama further criticised “...white folk for clutching their purses in elevators when young black men enter or locking their doors when black kids get too close” (187). From this criticism, it is evident that being a black boy in America implied that one was a thief. Dyson alludes to Obama’s criticism of the whites to show the suspicion with which the black race is met with in various social circles with the whites “clutching their purses” and “locking their doors”. This suspicion breeds a sense of contempt against the blacks who are in turn viewed as criminals and targets for police brutality, if not unwarranted murder.

A formalist analysis of the depiction of the challenges of black American life reveals the delayed narration. Instead of Dyson simply saying that the black boy **child** is perceived to be a thief, he prolongs the narration by succinctly painting the picture that necessitates the implication of blacks being thieves. The clutching of handbags and locking of doors reveals the deep-seated sense of suspicion towards the blacks. It is an image that, Dyson later laments, has been facilitated not by the individual sight but by the collective sight that has justified the mistreatment of blacks. He cogently puts it that “what we see with our eyes is often contradicted by what we see with our collective sight in a culture that has taught us to understand blackness in an especially malevolent fashion” (206). The misunderstanding of “blackness” is also a factor that had been at play when Henry Louis Gates Jr—a leading scholar in America—is arrested in his house. The arrest had mostly been necessitated by him speaking back to the police officer who had requested him to produce his identification and when he asked the officer to do the same, he was arrested. Gates asks the police officer, “Is this the way you treat a black man in America?” It is a question that carries with it not only the weight of frustration but also of alienation. The question elicits the image of a *black man* in America and not an American. Black men, it seems, are different from other Americans, they are out of place even when around their neighbours for it is the neighbours of Gates who

called the police on him complaining of a possible break-in after Gates jammed his door open. Let us not forget that this—Gates—is a man they had seen daily open his house. The rights of African Americans are different from the rights of other Americans a fact that Dyson comments on later on by arguing that blacks pursue “extraordinary measures” (194) to get the rights that whites start off with. Blacks, Dyson points out, use protests, make media appearances, and appeals to their leaders to bring attention to their grievances.

These observations on the unjust race relations in the United States justify the essayist’s bitterness with the Obama administration. It is understandable that he expected some sense of respect shown towards the blacks regardless of their social standing and the Gate’s incident was just a tipping point in the criticisms of the presidency mostly because of the position that Gates occupied in the society. However, Dyson ignores Obama’s reaction towards the racial prejudice shown to Gates by the white police. Following the outrage and tension between the African Americans and the police that the arrest had caused, Obama invited Gates and the arresting police officer to the White House not only to pacify Gates and the officer but also to calm any lingering tensions that may have been simmering between the blacks and whites. This act of pacification showed an act of leadership and a belief in dialogue to restore broken race relations.

The image of the black man in Obama’s America is an image of a man under siege from all elements of the society. His skin colour is defined and profiled not by himself but by the systems around him such as the justice system, the social system, and even to some extent the religious system. It is an image that shows the struggles that black men face cut across the social level, from the least to the highest. Gates’ standing in the society did not prevent his arrest on suspicion of a break-in by the “gaggle of police officers who had gathered” (190) outside his house. Dyson laments that Obama’s language in depicting the black man’s struggle in America is too cautious and calculated and “hardly captures the *fiery* realities that

burn in black bodies and communities” (194). Whereas it is true that Obama’s language was more cautious and calculated as Dyson puts it is also true that it was a language that was necessitated by the nature of the office of the presidency—divisive language would not only have put the country on a tense path but also led to the questioning of Obama’s capacity to lead. It is important to note that Obama’s depiction of the black community portrayed the struggles that they face in the best way he possibly could. It painted the depressive state that African Americans find themselves in yet Dyson says that the views of the president painted did not show the full picture. Obama spoke of communities that are “without hope”, “feel left behind” and as a consequence of tragic histories “often find themselves isolated” (194). The question that I ask myself at this point is that: If Dyson avers that Obama’s depiction of the African American struggle is not accurate then what are its shortcomings? The situation as pointed out is bad to the point that it justifies Dyson’s use of the terms “fiery” and “burn” to speak of the realities that African Americans find themselves in. According to him, Obama understated the struggle by using a careful, qualified, and cautious language. Dyson’s engagement with the visual imagery paints the picture of a brutal struggle for justice by the blacks. It is an image of a powerless community whose agency has been robbed from them and that which they have left is subject to brutality. In *The Black Presidency* reveals overstates his case when speaking of the African American struggle. He says that blacks and other minority communities cannot get the local authorities to “treat their slaughtered loved ones like human beings” (195). He uses “slaughter” to imply “murdered in cold blood” by the police officers meant to protect them. Slaughtering not only implies the cruelty in the killing of African Americans but also intentionality to the act itself. The racial profiling of blacks that Dyson seems to blame the president for can rightly be said to be an issue that had been there long before Obama took office. This bias based on skin colour emanates more from personal prejudice against the blacks than it emanates from the police system. It is a fact that

Dyson seems to ignore as he leans on the “depressing” image he paints to justify his dissatisfaction with Obama’s presidency when he points out that “Obama largely ignored these realities” (195). In ignoring the realities, Obama called for the black nation to respect the jury’s decision and remember that America was a nation of laws. It is these laws that have been applied selectively and especially against the African Americans. While resorting to violence is never the solution to anything, the pent-up anger and frustration at the injustice perpetrated against the blacks exploded in the form of violent protests which involved “throwing bottles, smashing car windows” and “vandalising property” (195). Protests, it seems, are the only ways through which the black communities can get the nation to pay attention to their plight. It is, however, unfortunate that these protests take an ugly turn into illegalities, something the president rightly condemned but then again a look into the history of blacks in America reveals that their plight has been ignored by the relevant authorities and progress has often times been achieved only when they protested. Dyson echoes this argument when he notes that the criminal activities among the blacks (looting and rioting) are as a “result of going unrecognized by the state for decades, a crime in itself” (195).

Contrary to Anderson’s argument in *Imagined Communities* that nations inspire love and a spirit of self-sacrifice, America has inspired fear and a sense of apprehension in the lives of African Americans. The crippling fear that has been instilled in the blacks leads black parents to advise their children on how to react when confronted by police officers. The most ironical aspect of this is that the police are supposed to protect all citizens but this changes when it comes to blacks who are seen as threats and even dehumanised. This is evident when Dyson reverts to the killing of Michael Brown who was an unarmed black man. In his submission to the courts, Officer Darren Wilson pointed out that his encounter with Brown—both of them six feet and four inches in height—left him feeling like a “five-year-old holding on to Hulk Hogan” (192) and that “it looked like a demon rushing towards him” (192). This

depiction creates two perceptions: The first is that no matter how equal in height and weight a black man may be to a white person, the black is inherently stronger and more violent—Hulk Hogan was a wrestler and thus Officer Wilson comparing Brown to Hogan casts the image of violence. As Wilson compares himself to a five-year-old, he casts an image of innocence and helplessness in the face of a “Hulk Hogan” and thus justifies his pulling the trigger. The second perception created by Officer Wilson’s impression of the black man is one that dehumanises him. He uses the pronoun “it” to describe Brown and continues to liken him to a demon. At the end of Wilson’s submission, Brown is cast as a violent wrestler and a demon against a helpless five year old which in turn justifies the officer’s killing of Brown in a hail of bullets. The officer is eventually acquitted by the jury.

Dyson criticises Obama’s presidency from the radical left; however, this criticism could be farfetched. He seems to be frustrated by Obama’s pragmatic approach to reconciling the racial divide. What Dyson ignores is the sensitivity the office of the president. In as much Obama would have wanted swift actions on the racial injustices that have historically plagued his community, he had to abide by the law and act on policies that would change the systemic bias against the African Americans. To act on the problems that have haunted the blacks, Obama and his administration put a premium on college enrolment and completion among the blacks and also the increased funding to the justice department more than any other president in history. These are just some of the facts that Dyson consciously or unconsciously chooses to ignore as he laments over Obama’s failure to act on race.

Through Dyson’s eyes, we get to see and experience black America; the image that comes across is an image of an isolated community who are trapped in a depressive web of police brutality and systemic racial injustice. It is a system in which they learn to adapt through various techniques so as to survive. The use of new technology is a survival technique used by the blacks in their quest for justice. Though it does not stop bullets from

piercing the bodies of young men, at least it acts as a means of the aggrieved getting justice. Dyson argues that the pursuit of justice is filled with racial undertones and injustice against the blacks and as such African Americans have resorted to recording videos of police brutality—and murder—in a bid to strengthen their quests for justice and reconstruct the narrative around black identity. By quoting Rev. Jesse Jackson, Dyson points out that “In some sense what makes the difference today is...the presence of a camera” (212). Charles Darwin puts it that “it is not the strongest of the species that survives or the most intelligent. It is the one that is most adaptable to change”. The changes that have occurred since the civil rights movements have seen an increase in the number of media outlets that compete for the same audience and also outlets that construct the black narrative. It is a narrative that often times conforms to the stereotypical portrayal of the black person as prone to violence and in some instances inadequate and this subsequently blinds the collective eyes when it comes to reconstructing the violent narrative. The presence of a camera in the form of mobile phones has made it possible for possible victims of police brutality to record their encounters and broadcast it to their intended audiences for the desired effect which is often times emotive rather than logical. In his criticism of Obama’s presidency, Dyson leans on the emotive side of the divide.

The image of a terrorized community does not just end with the male child but also stalks the female child. It is an image that is portrayed in the story of two black teenagers who were accosted by police officers as they peacefully assembled in their neighbourhood after a party that turned chaotic when racial epithets were hurled at them and “white parents...slapped a black female party participant” (212). Recorded on cell phone:

The video shows Casebolt— a police officer—violently slamming Dajerria—female victim—on the ground and forcefully planting his knee in her back as she cries out for her mother while her friends plead with Casebolt to stop. (213)

As the video captures one side of the narrative of violence, Dajerria gives the other side of the same narrative. In an interview, she recounts the event by saying that:

[Casebolt] told me to keep walking and I kept walking...He grabbed me and he like twisted my arm on the back of my braids and I was like telling him that he can get off me because I was hurting really bad. (213)

Dyson observes that fast terror scares the African Americans while slow terror scars them. Whereas fast terror is the terror that comes in the form of police injustice and brutality, slow terror comes in the form of suspicion based on the colour of their skin and the constant fear of one day being racially profiled and how to deal with it. These narratives from the Dajerria encounter with the police officer are embodiments of both the terror that scares them and the one that scars them. Dajerria's narrative reveals her submission to the officer's instruction which were arguably out of fear. The officer then goes ahead to scar Dajerria by grabbing her, twisting her arm and pinning her to the ground by planting his knee on her back as she pleads for her mother's help. The choice of words in narrating this ordeal does not leave anything to chance when it comes to depicting the brutality that the blacks go through at the hands of the police. "Violently slamming", "forcefully planting", "cries out". The phrases not only bring about the visual imagery but also make the readers feel what the victim was going through. They are images of ruthlessness and mercilessness when it comes to dealing with people of colour by the police; and as if physically brutalising Dajerria was not enough, the officer later "jumps up, pulls out his revolver, and points it out at the youths" (213). The physical scars sustained by the officers acts of brutality are not enough and Dajerria has to live with the trauma of having a gun pointed to her face by a police officer who was restrained by his colleagues. Had Casebolt not been restrained it is possible that Dajerria would have been part of the statistics of blacks who have been executed by white police officers in cold blood.

The idea of America being the land of endless opportunities fades in comparison to how blacks are treated. The opportunities that African Americans come across are those that have been toiled for while their counterparts take the same opportunities for granted. While other communities relate harmoniously with the police and quite fairly with other systems in America, the relationship between the blacks and the police is one full of tension and fear. This is a relationship that has apparently been conditioned within the different groups and has defined how they relate with each other.

3.3. Images of Africa in *The Black Presidency*

Even as I discuss Dyson's portrayal of the African American, one of the images that cannot escape my attention is his depiction of Africa. This he does through focusing on Obama's response to African issues. Whereas one may support Dyson's criticism of how Obama handled the issues of race in America because he is African American and may have suffered racial injustice first-hand, his attitude and the depiction of Africa is one that calls for attention primarily because Obama has a better understanding of Africa than Dyson given the fact that he has African blood in him and if this is not reason enough, he has also lived in Africa, Kenya specifically. The shared experience with Africa and Africans gives significant credit to Obama's portrayal of Africa than Dyson's.

Dyson begins his "defence" of Africa by titling the essay "A Native Son Scrambles for Africa" (145). It is Obama who is referred to as the native son in this case and Dyson borrows the title of Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*. He also alludes to the colonial history of Africa by referring to the scramble for Africa in the title of this essay. What is intriguing is how Dyson draws the parallels between Obama and the setting of *Native Son*. This is evidenced by the fact that both lived in the Southern Side of Chicago. This, however, is as far

as the parallels go. The image of a native son scrambling for Africa paints a rather ironic picture in the sense that it is an African who scrambles for Africa. This is the perception that Dyson builds as he begins his criticism of Obama's visit and address to African countries.

When Obama headed to Ghana in July 2009, the tune got dissonant and the tone got much harsher. Gone was the elegant balance between acknowledging American and European responsibility (145).

A reading and analysis of the Obama's speech in Ghana reveals Dyson's fixed bias against Obama's presidency. First of all, Obama acknowledged the West's attitude in approaching "Africa as a patron, rather than a partner" (1). This acknowledgement of the relations between the West and Africa bears so much weight within it and the undertones should have made Dyson appreciate Obama's stance on the West itself. Obama criticises the idea of patronising Africa rather than partnering with it but Dyson ignores it.

In a rather derisive tone Dyson seems to suggest, if not demand, that Obama should have apologised for America's responsibility in under-developing Africa—in his speech to the Ghanaians, and Africans at large, Obama states a fact that Dyson ignores. Obama states that "Development depends upon good governance...That is the change that can unlock Africa's potential" (1). This is a universal fact and Dyson's decision to ignore it as he criticises Obama's stance on Africa reveals his biased attitude towards the Obama administration. Dyson fails to acknowledge Obama's hopefulness towards Africa and his frustration with how corruption and unprincipled leadership have dragged the continent behind. On the one hand Africa, as Obama sees it, is an "important part of our interconnected world" (1) that is bound to realise its potential if only it embraces its responsibility of proper governance and on the other hand Africa, as Dyson sees it, is a continent that has "failed" because of its colonial history regardless of the years it has been independent.

To continue his criticism Dyson points out, quite rightly, that Obama chose the less corrupt and more stable African countries for his visit. These countries—South Africa, Ghana, and Tanzania, are portrayed as the stages on which Obama called out the unprincipled leadership and corruption that has plagued Africa. While this remains a legitimate concern when it comes the governing of African countries, Dyson does not to agree with the fact that it is Obama, the United States president, who castigates the failures of some institutions. Dyson calls this neo-colonialism proper. He puts it that, “If America’s and the West’s present tenure, and lingering influence, in Africa cannot be defined as neo-colonialism proper, it is certainly neo-colonialism lite” (149).

Dyson’s bone of contention with Obama’s policies regarding not only African Americans but also Africans reveals his deep-seated dissatisfaction with the president. This dissatisfaction blinds him to some of the issues and facts that I would consider obvious and he too would agree. On the one hand, corruption and poor leadership are to blame for most of the challenges that Africans go through and this, however much Dyson wants, cannot be pinned on what he considers to be “American” or “Western influence.” On the other hand parental neglect and lack of proper education and morally upright mentors within African American communities largely contributes to the issues of teenage delinquency. When Obama exposes these wounds, so that they can be treated, Dyson argues that he is exposing their nakedness and thereby embarrassing them and as such he, Obama, should apologise for doing so.

3.4 Identity Politics and the Burden of Misrepresentation

Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* reminds us a fundamental truth. In an analysis of what it means to be a patriot he reminds us that:

...nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love.” In everything natural, he says, there is always something unchosen. In this way, nation-ness is assimilated to skin colour, gender, parentage, birth-era—all those things one cannot help. (143)

It is true that the presidency of Obama has been—and will largely be—defined by the colour of his skin this is true in the sense that he has been labelled as the first African American president, the first black president, amongst other labels that were cast upon him. The choices he made were measured mostly not by the impact—be it positive or negative—they would have for the Americans but by the colour of his skin. He is a man who embodies the grace of Martin Luther King when a section of leftist the African American to which Dyson belonged longed and thirsted for him to unleash the militancy of Malcom X so that he could liberate them from the stranglehold of racial injustice. The grace with which Obama approached various sensitive issues and especially those touching on race was not so much welcome by some members of the the African American community. Dyson, it seems, was one of the African Americans who longed for a militant Obama as compared to a gracious Obama. They largely felt misrepresented by the man they thought would represent them. Dyson echoes this feeling of misrepresentation by quoting Kevin Johnson who opined that Obama was “A President for Everyone, Except Black People” (20).

Dyson’s continued criticism of the Obama presidency is further enhanced when he points out that Obama “tiptoed” (14) around racial issues. The image of the president tiptoeing creates a perception of someone who was either afraid or unsure of what he was

doing. In a way, Dyson suggests that the president was either afraid of white backlash or was unsure of what to do or say on this occasion. Dyson further argues that the president came up with what he calls a “racial template.” This, according to Dyson, was the President’s safe zone. Using this template the president would seemingly equivocate on racial matters and thereafter shift the blame to the people of colour. This, as Dyson, laments later seems to have been the president’s way of dealing with racial issues. He reinforces this argument by stating that “True to form, Obama shifted from a discussion of the police to the subject of black responsibility” (14). It is at this point that I question Dyson’s one-sided characterisation of the presidency with the question, “What about the song Amazing Grace?” This was Obama’s reaction to the shooting of harmless worshippers who had gathered in a church to worship in Charleston. Obama eulogises the dead by singing the hymn “Amazing Grace” after his speech in which he contrasts the killer’s hatred with the love his victims offered him by “opening the church doors and inviting a stranger to join in their prayer circle” (1). Obama approached the situation not only with the boldness it deserved but also with a thought introspection and self examination. At a moment when the nation was being driven back to the moments of racial tension the president stepped in and reminded his country of the need to be gracious to one another.

Dyson’s characterisation of the Obama presidency seems to stem from a sense of a deep-seated frustration with how the president approached and handled racial matters. It is true that he, Dyson, cannot stomach the feeling of a black president who does not definitively voice his support for the blacks and in the same breath his dissatisfaction with white brutality on the blacks. There is a tone of frustration and a feeling of betrayal that emanates from Dyson’s criticism of Obama. The knowledge that blacks overwhelmingly voted for Obama and that “many black politicians, however, are motivated to protect Obama because white backlash against him is inherently unjust” (19) seems to drive a feeling within Dyson that

Obama should at least recognise the efforts of his supporters and return the favour by protecting them. According to Dyson, Obama seems to have taken advantage of this loyalty from his black constituents.

How an individual identifies himself is normally shaped by where he belongs or chooses to belong. This fact is made clearer by Nira Yuval-Davis in *Belonging and the Politics of Belonging* where in arguing that belonging is usually a dynamic process which is constructed at three major levels. He states as follows:

The first level concerns social locations; the second relates to individuals' identifications and emotional attachments to various collectivities and groupings; the third relates to ethical and political value systems with which people judge their own and others' belonging/s. These different levels are interrelated, but cannot be reduced to each other, as so many political projects of belonging tend to assume. (199)

Dyson's criticisms of the Obama presidency are anchored on the second and the third levels of identification. He holds the view Obama, being black, should have reciprocated the emotional attachment the blacks had for him. His policies and stands on racial prejudice should not have been ones that reflect a common way (template) of handling racial issues but should have been policies that are strong on reflecting executive condemnation of 'white supremacy' and in a way avoiding shifting the blame to black responsibility.

An in-depth engagement with *The Black Presidency* reveals Dyson's deep seated sense of dissatisfaction with Obama and his presidency. Dyson relies on several critics of the Obama administration to justify his disagreement. This is evident when he notes that:

Despite his efforts that night, a journalist noted, some "have doubted Obama's broad-based appeal to the African American community; at the Superdome, he engaged...but failed to convince, as have Jesse Jackson and Bill Clinton in the past. (34)

It is interesting to note how the journalist (and Dyson by extension) rides on the perceived failures of Obama. The quotation carries with it the undertones that Obama was merely a performer and not a politician on the said night at the Superdome. Further still, Dyson summons the doubts that Americans had about a *Black man* who “never got angry or impatient in public” (35). Other than questioning his skin colour they also questioned his temperament.

A stereotype has been cast that blacks identified themselves (or were identified by others) with anger. This is a stereotype that even Michelle Obama bore as she campaigned for Obama. Walley-Jean in *Debunking the Myth of the “Angry Black Woman* argues that this is a stereotype that has dominated the society’s view of African American (fe)males even though there lacks any empirical evidence to support it. As Dyson argues that Obama failed to represent the African Americans on the political front based on his skin colour, he also implies that he failed to do so on the temperamental side. When he further states that “Many more blacks came to believe that his cool demeanour would make him the perfect black president” (35) he fails to recognise that the damage had already been done when he stated that Obama’s trust among his African American constituents was called into question based on his temperament. It is also farfetched to state that Obama was a perfect president. This is somewhat an ironical statement because Dyson’s criticism of Obama stems from Obama’s failure to be “angry” with the status quo that propagated racial injustices among black people. It is indeed true to say that Dyson expresses his anger through his writing. The anger and impatience that Obama fails to express in public is expressed through writing by Dyson. It is an anger that reveals his attitude towards the black presidency.

Obama may have failed when it came to acting black but he performed exemplarily when it came to speaking black—this is true according to Dyson. In as much as he may have “sat” on the fence when it came to dealing with issues that affected the blacks as well as the

whites he did not do so when he reverted to “black speech.” Black rhetoric seemingly returned Obama home. He (Obama) may have “misrepresented” the blacks in action by seeming lukewarm in his stance on race and other issues concerning black but in speech he totally owned and aced his black identity. Dyson’s frustration with Obama’s stance on race is quelled when Obama reverts to black rhetoric to woo his audiences. As pointed out earlier, Dyson was of the belief that Obama equivocated on matters of race so as not to attract white backlash. He further still went bare-knuckled on the blacks because he believed that they would never reprimand him.

The excitement with which Dyson receives Obama’s embrace of his identity is evident in how he narrates Obama’s black rhetorical skills. Dyson points out that:

As much praise as Obama has justly received for speaking in a way that does not assault the white eardrum or world view, his rhetoric is firmly rooted in black speech, whose best rhetoricians marry style and substance to spawn a uniquely earthly eloquence. (71)

This assertion paints two pictures of Dyson: The first is the picture of him deriding the president for speaking in a way that does not offend the whites. The question that arises thus is if the president does not offend the whites who does he offend? It may be argued that he offends the blacks. Which is the cause of Dyson’s frustration with the president. The second point Dyson makes is that “his rhetoric is firmly rooted in black speech.” Dyson longed for the president to “act black” even if for a moment and in black speech his longing was quenched. This indicated that Obama was one of them. Dyson’s excitement is also evident earlier on when he points out that Obama’s linguistic charisma, on the night of the Whitehouse Correspondent’s Association in 2012, was on display in terms of his “pop cultural references, vernacular verve, and effortless code-switching” (70). One might argue that the occasion being less formal required the president to somehow let loose so in as much

as he seemingly reverts to black speech to regale his audience it does not mean much and what sounded like black speech was actually Obama's way of being funny. My counter argument would be summed up with the saying that "a drowning man clutches at a straw." Dyson, in this case, was the drowning man. He longed to see a president who embraced his identity. After brutal centuries of playing second fiddle to the racist whites and African Americans struggling to prove their worth, Dyson, it seems, longed for someone who would show the world black genius. Obama was not forthcoming and on this night he quenched Dyson's thirst for a president who flaunts his blackness to the world.

Linda Thomas' argues in *Language, Society and Power* that:

Identifying yourself as belonging to a particular group or community often means adopting the linguistic conventions of that group, and this is not just in relation to the words you use, but also in relation to the way that you say them. (158)

This observation supports my position on Dyson's excitement about Obama's use of "black speech." It was a moment that Obama owned his identity. Through language he revealed himself as a member of the black community.

The image of the black man in America is captured by Dyson when he argues the case for black loyalty. Dyson argues that American citizenship rests on "forced" as well as "free" black labour. This assertion itself reveals the level of extortion and manipulation that the black race underwent to sustain America. He further paints the picture of a black race that has been denied opportunities in every sector and had its intelligence and humanity doubted by all major institutions such as the religious, academic, and the legal institutions. As though in an attempt to fill the gap that Obama has not filled (defending the African Americans), Dyson makes his case for the blacks by defending their loyalty to America. It was a loyalty that even led some blacks to reject their culture in favour of the white man's culture. Dyson points this out when he notes that "A significant minority of blacks have even sabotaged their race to

satisfy their love of whiteness...” (121). While painting the picture of blacks who were vilified by an unjust racial system, gave their lives for a democratic nation, and even forgave their tormentors, Dyson seems to suggest that Obama would have been justified to stand up for his community. Though he does not say this, Dyson’s assertions about black impossibilities is an appeal to the readers’ emotions, if not logic, to realise that indeed an injustice was done and the only person powerful enough to speak about it has not done so and if he has, he has not been effective.

The fact that Dyson feels and argues that Obama misrepresented the blacks does not prevent him from siding with Obama. This he does by revealing the challenges that Obama had to overcome to become the president. Even though he sides with Obama, he does so in order to reveal white bias against him. This he does in a bid to seemingly argue that though Obama may have been lukewarm in his approach to race matters the some whites were unforgiving in their approach to his American identity and especially his African heritage. Dyson points out that white guilt led to the suspicion and fear of African Americans. In Obama’s case, he points out, “it flared in a crude argument before his election: Obama cannot be trusted as the ultimate symbol of American identity and power...” (121). It mattered not where Obama was born or what he stood for; he could not be trusted with being the president of the most powerful country on earth. It was alright for Obama to be an American but not the symbol of American identity. Dyson paints the magnitude of this debate by his use of the words “flared” and “crude”. It was an argument for all to see and comment on and it did not spare Obama. It somehow ripped him apart through the dissection of his identity and especially extent of his blackness. Whatever the extent of his skin colour, he could not be trusted. The whites who feared him thought he would do to them what they did to the blacks centuries ago and even at the time.

The subject of belonging to a particular race and the expectations that came with it is one that Obama could not avoid. As pointed out earlier, his actions were largely measured not by their impact but by the colour of his skin mostly by those on the right. Arguably, Obama could not be black and American at the same time. Being black—on the one hand—meant knowing and appreciating the history of slavery and carrying his blackness with pride everywhere he went. Being black was Obama remembering that he owes his presidency to “blacks and their courageous allies who fought...to gain full citizenship for black folk. Without them Obama could not have become president” (151). While on face value this assertion may sound convincing it would be prudent to acknowledge that it took the more than the blacks to ensure that Obama became president. His vision for a better America did not appeal to the blacks alone but to a larger percentage of the American voting bloc. Being black then, it seems, meant having a moral debt to the founding fathers who risked and lost their lives so Obama could be president and since this debt could not be repaid to the debtors, Obama was supposed to pay it to the present generation by “flaunting” his blackness. On the other hand, being white meant that Obama turned a blind eye to the plight of African Americans and those with whom he shared the same skin colour, Dyson reminds us of Obama’s criticism of Africa for which he got off the hook because he was black. He further still opines that Obama too “quickly got free of the burdens of history that ought to weigh on him more” (150). The undertones with these assertions are that Obama was trying to be white by letting go off the historical burdens that should have served as his constant reminder that blacks deserved better.. In a way, Dyson seems to suggest that Obama was adopting and appreciating the superiority of the white culture and denigrating the black culture; he was acting like the slaves who sold-out their own so that they could find favour with their white masters. This he asserts when he points out that “It may be the pressure to prove his patriotism that encouraged Obama to either ignore or scorn elements of black identity” (151).

Though it may come across as him trying to defend Obama, the attitude within it reflects a man who is disappointed with his leader who is acting in ways that are somewhat reminiscent of the African American slaves who sold out their own. Patriotism in this case is used sarcastically by Dyson to sneer at Obama for he reminds us that most communities faced the same battle of loyalty to kin and tribe over country.

It is true that Obama faced an uphill struggle when it came to being the president of the United States and representing the blacks as he would have wanted. His identity—blackness—had been a cause for concern during the campaigns and he carried this elephant still to the White House. Taking into consideration the historical injustices meted against the blacks, it would be difficult to balance between being black and being American. Dyson seems to underscore this point when he states that Obama became the ultimate symbol of a man “wishing to be both black and American...” (153) meaning that a black man cannot be American. The history of racial injustice alienates a black man from claiming his part within the American society. If a black man chooses to be American then he has to forfeit one aspect of his being so as to fully embrace the other. For Obama being both black and American remained a wish and as his presidency evolved. Dyson observes that he appeared to have embraced the white culture and forfeited the black. “...he appears to have mastered the American side of the equation better than he has learned how to engage a healthy blackness in public” (153).

It is definitely evident that Dyson was greatly dissatisfied with Obama’s failure to somehow parade his blackness and culture. He satirically points out that it is understandable that Obama considers himself the “black *president*” rather than the “*black* president”. The implication is that Obama was a president who was black but not a president of the blacks. Though he might look like them, he was not one of them. This is a sentiment Dyson echoes earlier when he stated that Obama was the president of America but not a president of the

black America. By arguing that it is “understandable” Dyson seems to be conceding the battle of blackening Obama—making him not only look black but also be black.

Clarence Darrow, during the defence of Ossian Sweet in 1926, reminded the jury that the life of the Negro race has always been a life of injustice, tragedy, and oppression. The law had made the black man equal to the white man but the white man and the institutions that existed had denied him this liberty. In a prophetic tone, Darrow projected that the future of the Negro will be a future of “...sorrow, tribulation and death among the blacks, and perhaps the whites” (96). An understanding of the history of the Negro reveals that it has been a history of looking out for each other—though this assertion cannot be entirely true, it bears within it some truth about the African American life. Darrow on this day convinced an entirely white jury to set free a black man who had been accused of murdering a white man. The history of the African Americans is also littered with instances that bear semblance to the actions of Clarence Darrow. W.E.B Dubois defended the intelligence of the blacks when it was called into question, Martin Luther King Jr led the demonstrations to ensure that blacks enjoyed the rights to vote, James Baldwin also played a leading role in the discussions on race. The black man looked out for his brother. But what of Barack Obama? This is the question that Dyson seems to ask himself as he dissects the presidency of the first black man. Dyson largely and rightly argues that Obama’s presidency was made possible by the blacks who came before him. By doing this, he somehow falsely paints Obama as an opportunist. He argues that “Obama cannot have it both ways: he cannot benefit from King’s and the civil rights movement’s effort but fail to add in some way to their legacy...” (157). Dyson’s frustration and anger is evident in this assertion. He laments about Obama’s failure to carry on the legacy of King and his compatriots by somewhat ignoring the race factor in his presidency and painting it as a black issue when he—Obama—paid attention to it.

The question of black identity is one that Dyson seems to not let go as he engages with what the Obama presidency meant (and still means) to the African Americans. This is clearly evident when he in a rather remorseful tone argues that Obama's reluctance to deal with the race issue head on has robbed the nation of a "beautiful mind on the issue of race" (158). Dyson alludes to Obama's memoir *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* in which he tackles issues of his identity both as a man and as a black person in America.

The image of an underperforming president is also one that Dyson cannot let go. This he does while somehow ignoring important milestones on the Obama presidency. He ignores that Obama commuted more sentences on blacks than any other president in the history of America and that his administration put a premium on enrolment and completion of college education by black children and even directed more funding to their education.

These images are painted using the subject of identity. It is easy to pick Dyson's attitude from the language he uses to criticise Obama. While my analysis thus far may lead one to assume that Dyson only offers a critique of Obama, it would be prudent to acknowledge that he also praises him in some instances but then again this praise is for purposes of advancing a certain criticism. This is clearly evident when he terms Obama's memoir as the most poignant depiction of the race relations in the history of the nation and then goes ahead to lambast him for his "sparseness on race" (158) and then pins it down to his temperament of trying to keep the racial peace which in the end harms black interests. Dyson's sarcasm cannot escape one's attention as he offers his assessment of Obama's reticence on racial matters. It is a given that presidents have to offer direction on matters that affect their countries but then again Dyson blaming Obama's temperament for the misfortunes that have befallen the blacks was quite insensitive and arguably uncalled for. This actually marks the level of his dissatisfaction with Obama's presidency. Dyson

continually characterises Obama as an underperforming president and one who is against the blacks. This he does with disregard to the somehow pro-black initiatives the president started such as “My Brother’s Keeper” which was meant to ensure black youth enrolled and completed college and also stayed away from crime. When Obama is lauded for fielding questions from women during a press briefing, Dyson points out that all the women called on were white and at the end of the briefing an African American “forced” a question on the state of African Americans. The idea of a forced question elicits the feelings of a somewhat repressed press briefing room where only white women were allowed to freely ask their questions and April Ryan—the African American woman who asked the question—had to labour for her chance. It is at this point that I question whether Dyson seems to covertly suggest that Obama is a closet racist or racist.

Dyson’s engagement with sarcasm to express his dissatisfaction with the Obama presidency is further evident when he refers to Obama as the “Reprimander in Chief” (173) which is a distortion of his rightful title of “Commander in Chief.” Obama had occasionally called on the blacks to stop blaming racism for their personal failings; he further still called on the African Americans to exercise paternal responsibility by admonishing absentee fathers. While Obama seemingly exercised his role as a “big brother” to the African Americans, Dyson saw this as some sort of moral reproach. He points out that “...Obama has in the worst way possible targeted black people, not for support but instead for moral reproach” (168). Racism has played (and still plays) a significant role in the lives of not only African Americans but also the whites who have to live with the tag of oppressors. It has shaped the history of America and as such it is not a light matter. It elicits emotions of guilt in some and apprehension in others. While there are whites who value black lives there are some who are still blinded by the dogma of white superiority. This argument also applies to the African Americans in the sense that there are some who would like to blame their

misfortunes on racism; this therefore breeds an unending chain of excuses which are tied to white guilt. When calling on the black graduates of Morehouse College not to make “bad choices” (177) and admitting that he himself made some bad choices, Obama was merely looking out for the younger generation of African Americans. He further tells them that there is no longer room for excuses and that “Excuses are tools for the incompetent, used to build bridges to nowhere and monuments of nothingness” (177). What Dyson does not see as he offers his criticism of Obama is that Obama is simply asking the young black graduates not to slacken. He had just come out of a brutal campaign in which he battled every racial sentiment thrown against him and won; had he lost it would probably have been blamed at the unjust racial system but Obama refused to take racism. In also calling for black paternal responsibility, Obama seeks to curtail the root cause of most of black delinquency causes. Dyson fails to remember that in the memoir he praised Obama for, Obama narrated his experience in searching for his father’s homeland, an experience in trying to reconnect with a part of him that had been disconnected by the brutal hand of death. It is an experience that Obama wept for. Obama knew the anguish of having to live without a father and he seemingly did not want any other black child to go through the same. Reliable research has indicated that children of African American homes without fathers are more likely to engage in crime, drop out of college, and also be jailed. Obama reflects on the issue of paternal responsibility by stating that:

A lot of young boys and young men in particular, they don’t see an example of fathers or grandfathers, uncles, who are in a position to support families and be held in respect...this is an issue of the kinds of communities we are building. (171)

Obama underscores the role of parents and role models in the lives of young black males. The absence of his father from his life has shaped not only how he raises his daughters but also how he wants African American homes to look like. Fathers—and mothers too—Obama

believes play a very important role in the lives of their children. They not only shape a family but also a community and the nation at large.

Where Obama seeks to protect a community from the vices that have plagued it, Dyson wants him to protect the race. Dyson calls Obama's charge to the blacks "harsh rebukes" and argues that the new generation of African Americans endure a challenge their forefathers and mothers never endured: "public shaming by a black president" (179). It is right to say that Dyson is too blinded by race to see that Obama is more interested in the welfare of the community and for it to be achieved the ones at risk and prone to propagate the vices must be protected by their families.

Dyson expresses his dissatisfaction with a president who publically chastises black for their failures. If this had been done by a white president then the argument would have been that the president was racially insensitive. Now that the person best placed to understand what ails the African American community does it, Dyson cannot take it. The question that subsequently arises is that what is better? A public "shaming" or years of incarceration, college dropouts, unfulfilled dreams among other misgivings occasioned by dysfunctional families. The better option would arguably—if not definitely—be what Dyson considers shaming. Obama simply seeks to correct a cancer he has seen destroying his community.

It is easy to detect the frustrated figure Dyson cuts as he characterises Obama's presidency. It was a presidency that he had put so much hope on with regards to the black community. The hope that Obama champions was perceived to be a hope for better race relations in America and the hope of a president who would speak out for the blacks. Obama spoke *of* and *to* the blacks while Dyson wanted him to speak *for* the blacks. **This** was a community that arguably sat back as he "lectured" them on their moral and personal failings compared to the whites who would not have taken it. This is evident when Dyson speaks of Obama's response to the Louis Gates incident in which he said that the police acted

“stupidly” in arresting the Harvard professor at his house. Terming the actions of the police as stupid did not sit well with the police who got “upset” (191). Dyson takes this reaction by the police as a racial reaction. A black man cannot criticise a white person however high on the social ladder that person may be. The frustrated figure that Dyson cuts as he depicts the Obama presidency is occasioned by the feeling that the president should have shown some remorse and sympathy towards the souls of his black folk—the folk who sat back and patiently took his acts of “tough love” without saying a word against him.

What remains to be factual is that though Obama had a shared lineage in that he had a white mother, was raised by white grandparents, and had a black father, he was mostly identified as a black person and he wanted it that way. This is why he moved to Chicago which has a large population of African Americans. This was the identity which he bore. The black community accepted him when a section of the white community saw him as part of the other no matter how much of their culture he had assimilated considering that he spent much of his life with his white grandparents and his mother and how successful he was. It is arguably true that Dyson feels that Obama owes the black community some sort of debt. As argued earlier, Dyson expected Obama to carry on the heritage of fighting for the blacks that Martin Luther King and his compatriots had began. To him, Obama seems to have reneged on this cause. Dyson argues that Obama has been emotionally distant from the blacks and when he came close to being empathetic with the blacks he relegated this to his attorney general—Eric Holder by sending him to Ferguson during the violent protests. Dyson however, argues that Obama should have gone in person. He puts it that “Perhaps a measure of empathy lay behind Obama’s...sending Eric Holder...though he surely should have gone himself” (201). As though trying to fill a gap left by the president—that of being vocal on race matters especially those that have been affecting the black community—Dyson takes up the role of the spokesperson of the African Americans and as he does this he, to some extent,

realises that there is only much he can do unlike the president who has the authority of the “bully pulpit” from where he can tilt the scales of justice. This realisation subsequently drives the frustration that Dyson has with the black presidency. Like the Jews, he had expected a militant Messiah but the one who came advocated for peace and adopted a pragmatic approach to sensitive matters. He advocated for the politics of respectability even when the other end—right wingers and conservatives—had perfected the art of mudslinging him. Dyson, while defending the blacks, shows how Obama—a black himself—misrepresented them as he “represented” them. This is what drives the argument of identity politics and the burden of misrepresentation that Obama bore which we learn from Dyson as he passionately laments of the racial injustice that plagued the African American community under Obama’s watch.

It is easy to deduce that Dyson longed for Obama to speak of race and especially the racial prejudice that faced African Americans. Obama’s voice mattered most compared to that of his wife or even his aides. Dyson’s dissatisfaction with him stemmed from the fact that Obama was way too cautious and calculated on things race something that Eric Holder later on reveals was necessitated by the nature of the presidency. Holder—the then Attorney General—reminds Dyson that, “Every word of every conversation that he (Obama) has is looked at, dissected, criticized, praised...He cannot be seen as a polarizing figure” (234). A closer look at how Dyson describes some of the key black individuals in the Obama administration reveals that he is more lenient and at peace with those who candidly spoke of race. He even compares them to Obama to show how they risked their public images in order to defend the communal image—black identity. Dyson, when discussing Michelle Obama, argues that “It is her racial candour that distinguishes Michelle from her husband” (215). He further goes ahead to reveal that it is Michelle who pushed Obama to side with blacks in racial issues thereby portraying her as Obama’s black consciousness. The implication with

this is that Obama wasn't willing to side with *his* loyal constituents and it took a nudge from his wife for him to do so. Dyson's characterisation of Michelle portrays her as a heroine of some sort and also reveals a more palatable towards her. He says that "Michelle Obama's achingly honest remarks drew criticism from right-wing quarters but her forthright expression...is precisely the sort of testimony that the nation need to hear from voices that matter" (215). Michelle is rightly portrayed as clinical and as one who takes no hostages in this depiction by the use of the phrases "achingly honest" and "forthright expression" compared to Obama whom Dyson paints as "tame" (233).

Holder—the other voice that mattered in the Obama administration—is portrayed as "fair and tough" in his discussion on race compared to his tame "black boss in the Oval Office" (233). It is easy to pick up Dyson's derisive attitude towards Obama as he compares him to those whom he paints in favourable light. In this instance, Dyson distances Obama from the blacks who speak of race while carrying out their duties by referring to him not by name but by the location of his office and the colour of skin. He argues that Holder "fought vigilantly to protect the Voting Rights Act" (233) and that he was viewed in favourable light in some black sections as compared to Obama. What Dyson forgets as he "sneers" at Obama in light of Holder and Michelle is that it is Obama as the president who increased the funding to the justice department under which Holder works; a fact that Holder reminds Dyson in an interview but which he somehow chooses to forget. Holder fairly puts it that "He [Obama] gave me in that first year the largest increase in the history of the Civil Rights Division, in terms of lawyers and money which enabled us to do the things we've done..." (234). Holder's confession reveals Obama's dedication to limiting the impacts of racial injustice right from the start of his administration. Obama knew and understood the sensitivity of the position he held when it came to dealing with issues that touched on race and as such it was much easier

for him to act on race rather than speak on race; Dyson, it seems, wanted a black president who spoke on race more than they acted on race.

3.5 Conclusion

The American identity has been built on various aspects and key among them is race. It matters less how oppressive the stranglehold of race has been upon the African Americans, they cannot wish it away. The house in which their presidents reside and **will** reside for as long as the nation exists will always bear on it the imprint of racism in the form of slavery. It is a White House that was put together with black sweat and also black blood. Lincoln added to his legacy by abolishing slave trade, Lyndon B Johnson added to his by signing into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These were monumental actions that were hinged upon years of physical and mental anguish on the blacks. While both presidents managed to give Africans Americans hope and freedom in their future endeavours, they could not vanquish the mental anguish that the blacks had gone through. Obama's presidency initiated a hopefulness that had not been experienced before—even with the abolition of slavery and the signing into law the two monumental bills. This was a hope that forty years earlier had been a dream. It was a relentless and stubborn hope that had endured many stillbirths in the form of assassinations of African American leaders and failed presidential campaigns. For a long time the anxiety and fear of talking about and confronting the issue of race had been repressed as both the whites and blacks lived through these tense periods and waiting for the “dream” to come to pass. The election of Obama gave Americans a chance to look at the race from a different perspective. It gave the blacks a sigh of relief that the struggles of their forbearers had counted for something. It seemed the years of racial injustice meted against the blacks would **be** reversed and someone whose voice mattered would talk about race from the white house and affect policies that would see these injustices

reduced if not stopped. These aspirations however were too much for Obama who had inherited a country whose basic genetic component is made of the racial biases. He could not reverse this as fast as some African Americans had expected. However confidently Obama would have spoken of race, would not have healed the wounds of parents who lost their children to white supremacists. It could not have brought justice to families that had their sons—and daughters—unjustly sentenced to long prison terms for crimes for which their white counterparts received lighter sentences. It would not have erased the history of hoses, protests, marches, and dog wounds that were inflicted upon his predecessors by the brutal Jim Crow laws. Acting on race would have brought some sort of healing. The racial wound is one that has gone too deep to be healed in a day. It is a wound that had lasted for more than two centuries and eight years would never have been enough to heal it. Obama acted on race more than of speaking on it. He called on his constituents to deal with the root cause of some of the mass black incarceration which is absentee fathers. Progress is oftentimes a slow and frustrating process. Many blacks, and I believe Dyson was one of them, had expected a radical shift in the race relations. They had expected a “messiah” who would weave his magic and the centuries of racial torment would be wiped away within the eight years Obama was in office but this was not forthcoming as fast as they had expected. Their patience was wearing out and these repressed anxieties between the blacks and whites exploded towards the end of his presidency. Dyson, while penning his criticisms, rides on the disappointments of the wheels of progress that were slow. He desired to see a warrior-like Obama who would parade his blackness to the world if not to the whites. Obama, in his pragmatism, knew the delicate balance he had to strike between being a president to the Americans and also a black man who is aware of the racial history.

My analysis in this chapter reveals the frustrated figure that Dyson cuts as he longed for Obama to parade his blackness. Dyson’s criticisms of Obama have been exaggerated in

some instances. He looks at how Obama speaks on race as opposed to how he acts on race. He salutes and admires those who confidently speak on race and derides the man who acts on race by influencing policies that have been biased against the blacks. Though Dyson is right in offering his criticisms, his biases have led him to miss the bigger picture which Obama tried to point him and the entire black nation to—which is acting on race (however slow and frustrating it was) would have far reaching impacts on them than just speaking on race.

CONCLUSION

In concluding this study, the picture emerges of a presidency that is largely contested by both writers who I have study in this research. Both writers paint the picture of a country that is replete with racial injustice both in the past and the present. Despite the shared understanding between the two writers that Obama was the first African American president, the reactions to his presidency are quite different. In this study, I offer my conclusions in two sections with each focusing on one of the writers that I studied and if they met the objectives of this study set out in the first chapter.

Almustafa, the poet, celebrates the presidency by painting a hopeful picture of America which in spite of the racial challenges it faces chooses to believe that it shall overcome. Through his poems, Almustafa seems to echo Obama's first presidential campaign slogan "Yes We Can". He paints the picture of a country that is at peace with itself and its president by showing the universal appreciation of not only the Obama presidency but also the president himself. The appreciation and ease towards the presidency came not only from the Americans but also the international community. History is used by the poet to infuse a sense of belief in the African American community. This comes against the backdrop of a racially charged society that is almost breaking apart. African Americans are subject to racial prejudice and especially in the form of police brutality. The poet, instead of painting the grim picture brought about by the murder of the blacks, looks back at the history of his ancestors who were sold at the auction block and how the his forefathers and the civil rights leaders fought for the rights of the African Americans. The poet seems to understand the prematurity of the assumption that the election of Obama ushered in a post-racial America. The election of Obama, the poet puts across, is an achievement that had been a long time coming and should be celebrated as such. This he does by taking into consideration the history of the African American.

Almustafa focuses on the significance of the election of Obama more than he focuses on the past events that made this election possible. His attitude throughout the collection of his poetry is that of a nation that has somehow been reborn and given the chance to right the wrongs that had been done by the previous leaders. The poet focuses on the idea of a new dawn that gives the nation the opportunity to create for itself a new identity both within itself and globally.

By consciously taking into account the history and emphasizing the significance of present, the poet paints a vivid picture of what it means to be both black and American. This subsequently underscores an element of fairness in his characterization and celebration of the hope ushered in with election of Obama.

It is fair to argue that while Almustafa celebrates the hope that the election of Obama ushered in America and also Obama himself, he is often at pains to criticize Obama and his administration because he is an African American just like him. Almustafa finds himself conflicted between pointing out the ills around him and squarely laying them at the feet of the administration. This is largely because he and Obama share the same heritage. Almustafa also fails to criticize Obama because he largely idolizes him in his poems. The Obamas are elevated to the position of gods and held in high esteem while the poet shrinks himself in light of the Obamas—he sees himself as a mere mortal. For this reason his depiction of the Obama presidency is largely characterized by praise and where criticism tries to bring itself up, he evades it. The race card used by Almustafa is one that serves to show some sense of pride in him that finally someone who look like him occupies the Oval office and this calls for the celebration.

Almustafa's engagement with history is one that serves to show that a debt has been paid and somehow justice has been served. This is so because he seems to portray the African

American as a victim of the American. Many of the misfortunes that befell and still befall the African Americans can be directly attributed to the white Americans who have propagated the unjust racial system has heavily weighed down the blacks. This is an image the poet cogently paints as he talks of the protests, marches, brutal murders, and unfair treatment of the blacks who persevered all sorts of brutality meted against them. The African Americans held on to the dream of their forefathers and hoped that one day they too will reach the mountain top, if not the Promised Land. The debt of racial injustice is seems to have been paid by the election of Obama as the first African American president and this serves as a shot in the arm for a race that had been downcast for a long while. The years of believing that someday the African Americans would get to the Promised Land finally came to pass with Obama's historic victories.

Secondly, Dyson's characterisation of the Obama presidency also focuses on the present and the past. The present is characterised with instances of racial injustice against the blacks and also calls for black responsibility by the president and also a call to shun the card of victimhood among the blacks. Dyson's perception of the past is quite different from that of Almustafa in that he views the struggles that the African Americans went through made possible the election of Obama and as such he—Obama—should repay this debt. This is a debt that Obama should have repaid by "favouring" the African Americans and using his office to boldly speak for the African Americans, if not defend them. Dyson seems dissatisfied not with the Obama administration but Obama himself as the president. He in a way argues that Obama failed to repay the debt he owed the African Americans who fought for their rights. Dyson leans more on the subject of belonging and identity to characterise the said presidency. His arguments reflect the attitude of dissatisfaction because Obama failed show his appreciation to the African American community by standing up for them.

The picture that emanates from Dyson's characterisation of the Obama presidency and that of America is an almost apocalyptic picture of the presidency. He paints a chaotic picture in which African Americans are the victims of the Obama presidency and faults the president for it. This he does without somehow realising the demands of the job and the efforts that were put in place to correct the systemic problems that have plagued the African American community over time. Dyson's depiction of the presidency is largely a self-centred depiction more than it is a universal depiction. This is so in the sense that Dyson expected Obama to somehow show favouritism towards the African Americans at the expense of the other Americans since he believed that it was their "turn to eat." Dyson picks a fight with the president where and when Obama fails to show favouritism towards the African Americans and he—Dyson—openly celebrates when Obama flaunts his blackness to the world. This shows Dyson's skewed characterisation of the presidency and subsequently his unfairness in characterisation both to the presidency and the Americans. It is in this instance that I am reminded of Obama's refusal to play into the trappings of identity politics which occurred long before he became the president of America. This is evident when he, in *Dreams from my Father*, warns his Aunt while visiting in Kenya that it is playing into tribal politics that "holds us back."

Hearing my aunt's traffic in such stereotypes, I would try to explain to them the error of their ways. "It's thinking like that that holds us back", I would say we are all part of one tribe. The black tribe. The human tribe. (348)

Not acting as a representative of the blacks but of the Americans was not Obama failing to favour the African Americans but him sticking to his beliefs of the human tribe and not just a part of it.

In conclusion, this study has successfully demonstrated the role that the African American writers play in the characterisation of the Obama presidency. In a nutshell, then, the idea of a nation whose identity is largely intertwined with racism and the desire to “perfect the union” has been explored and analysed as presented by both writers.

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