

Review - Becoming

Written by Dipti Tamang

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Becoming
by Michelle Obama
Crown Publishing Group, 2018

“Since stepping reluctantly into public life, I’ve been held up as the most powerful woman in the world and taken down as an “angry black woman.” I’ve wanted to ask my detractors which part of that phrase matters to them the most- is it “angry” or “black” or “woman?” (Michelle Obama, 2018: x). Michelle Obama’s *Becoming* is a reflection of her personal journey, which is precisely why it is a politically relevant book. It provides a firsthand account of a woman of stature in US-American politics experiencing gender and race in her individual journey and later as the First Lady. In the first segment of the book, Obama provides an account of her personal struggles as an ambitious girl from the black community growing up in the Southside of Chicago. Reading into these narratives of her days as a teenager outlines the manner in which identities are not insular, compartmentalized categories. Unlike generalizations of black communities as a homogenous racial group, she brings forth the internal divisions among these communities along lines of class and spatiality, which radically alters the notion of the ghettoization of black communities.

In the latter half of her journey into the public space as the First Lady of the USA the memoir provides crucial reflections into the functioning of class, gender and race in US politics. In the personal sections on her relationship with Barack, one gets an honest insight into the sacrifices she made as a spouse for the sake of her family, her husband and the country, reflecting upon the patriarchal structures premised upon specific gender roles. *Becoming* is refreshing and honest in its narration of these aspects, where the author writes without the intention to produce new forms of knowledge or theoretical frameworks for any specific audience. Yet, it is this subtle narration of lived experiences which provides a crucial theoretical interrogation into existing realities of identities such as gender, race and class that work at multiple levels to create differences amongst individuals and communities.

The memoir sheds an important light on the realities of women in US-American and international politics. The ‘othering’ of women within the theory and practice of IR often renders women as the outsider in political spaces — often presumed to be a privileged forte of men (Runyan 1991, 69). While Hillary Clinton was called out for being ‘too involved’ in the political affairs of her husband, Michelle Obama was under public scrutiny for both her race and gender. It is this practice of treating women as the ‘other’ that opened up the contours of the discipline to feminist interrogations which questioned the foundation of IR (Grant and Newland 1991; Peterson 2004). Feminism has therefore gradually emerged as a strong discipline within the field of IR, questioning and interrogating key concepts from a gendered standpoint. This kind of interrogation has brought forth issues that are otherwise rendered invisible or marginalized as ‘women’s issues’. Such interrogations have also radically transformed the manner in which IR is both perceived and practiced.

In reading *Becoming*, readers get a glimpse of the underlying gendered ideas that define the international system. Though Obama claims that there is no “handbook for incoming First Ladies of the United States”, there is an underlying idea that there are certain norms, roles and images laid down for the First Ladies of the United States of America (p. 283). “First Ladies showed up in the news, having tea with the spouses of foreign dignitaries, they sent out official greetings on holidays and wore pretty gowns to state dinners. I knew they picked up a cause or two to

Review - *Becoming*

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champion as well” (p. 284). Such ideas, which are deeply institutionalized into the global political system, reflect the internal gender regime that defines acceptable behavior, clearly segregating the organized spaces along gendered lines. Intertwined with this idea of gender is the question of race, as Obama writes, “I understood already that I’d be measured by a different yardstick. As the only African American First Lady to set foot in the White House, I was the ‘other’ almost by default” (p. 284). Such recollections by the former First Lady are reflective of the centrality of race and gender to US politics.

Michelle Obama was not only constantly compared to the class and grace epitomized by the former First Lady, Laura Bush, but unabashedly criticized for her race and appearance by the likes of Pamela Ramsay Taylor, who referred to Michelle Obama as an “ape in heels”. Her visit to Buckingham Palace was in the news as she was criticized for ‘breaking protocol’ by hugging the Queen (p. 318), which was seen as ungracious and inappropriate for a First Lady meeting with royalty. As a reader, one can feel Obama’s overwhelming weariness when she pens it down in one simple yet powerful line, “I am telling you, this stuff hurt” (p. 265). One can also appreciate here how being constructed as the ‘other’ can work to bring someone down and constantly make them question the idea of belonging.

Being an ambitious, working woman with political ideas and conviction, it is clear from her writing that she wanted to do more in her capacity as the First Lady than just be restricted to her appearance as the ‘First Lady’. However, the idea of First Ladies as equal political partners is unimaginable — “First Ladies had no place in the West Wing” (p. 335). Both Hillary Clinton, during her time as the former First Lady, and Michelle Obama had to face this reality, as is recollecting in her memoir. Such practices are reflective of the gendered order of the global system which pushes feminist scholars to question the foundations of the theories and practices of IR. The interrogation by early feminist scholars was premised upon this logic of dismissing the role and contribution of women as agents. Bringing in a gender relation approach renders these practices visible and intrinsically interwoven into the structures of global IR.

Women in political spaces are measured by different yardsticks for their ability to perform as rational, political beings. For instance, opinionated females are often stereotyped as emotional, hysterical beings. Such essentialization further acts as a powerful deterrence for women from actively engaging and participating in organized political spaces as individual, rational human beings. Obama writes, “I was female, black and strong, which to certain people, maintaining a certain mind-set, translated only to “angry”” (p. 265).

It is therefore unsurprising when women like Michelle Obama, Congresswoman Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez and many more are depicted as angry females for simply having an opinion. The media at present is highly obsessed with Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez’s show of pleasure — again another forte solely seen as the privilege of men. Body shaming is another powerful tactic that has been actively propagated to bring down women by depicting them as misfits.

Elements of the media have resorted to brutal forms of shaming women physically, racially and in a sexist manner, and questioning their ability to perform. For instance, Michelle Obama was brutally body shamed and criticized for her physique by Keith Ablow (a prominent member of the Fox News’ Medical A-Team) during her campaign for healthy food habits to reduce obesity among children. Such comments and behavioral practices highlight how women are constantly put to the test for their ability to perform as rational, credible individual beings. “I kept hearing about but didn’t know — a too-tall, too-forceful, ready-to-emasculate Godzilla of a political wife named Michelle Obama” (p. 264). She talks about how this made her feel like a misfit and instilled in her a sense of otherness which demonstrates the power of such tactics to make an individual not only question the sense of belonging, but also one’s own worth. By gendering these logics, we can reveal how the normalized practices of privileging masculinity work to segregate women and sexual minorities.

Feminist scholarship in IR is enriched with sources that are diverse in forms and nature and have their roots in the lived realities of individuals and communities. Incorporating *Becoming* into the academic cannon will further benefit the burgeoning pool of feminist literature. *Becoming* is not only a good read but also enriching for its honest and candid exposure of the realities of gender and race as it plays out in US-American and international politics. The strength of the book lies in how it brings these politically relevant questions to the fore in a manner that is easily

Review - *Becoming*

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graspable and relatable to all segments of society. On the other hand, it is precisely this subtlety and simplicity which tends to once again treat these questions in a manner that does not necessarily push the reader to critically analyze them as questions of political relevance. Therefore, while *Becoming* has quickly become a best seller, the reality is that it might just be picked up as a good read, enjoying a popular fan base without any further introspection.

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