

## **CHAPTER SIX**

**LIVES IN “AFFECTIVE COMMUNITIES”: MICHELLE  
OBAMA’S *BECOMING*, SUSAN RICE’S *TOUGH LOVE*,  
AND KAMALA HARRIS’ *THE TRUTHS WE HOLD***

I still believe that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice, but nobody is going to do the hard bending, if not you and me. It's our choice, and I have always believed we must choose each other. (Susan Rice, *Tough Love* 18)

My sincere hope in telling my story is that others may find in it inspiration and empowerment, perhaps a source of strength and fearlessness. If nothing else, I aim to share what I have learned along the way: the importance of always doing your best; picking yourself up and dusting yourself off; and driving down the court to the bucket—all while maintaining grace under fire. (Susan Rice, *Tough Love* 18-19)

It was possible...to live on two planes at once—to have one's feet planted in reality but pointed in the direction of progress...You got somewhere by building that better reality, if at first only in your own mind...[Y]ou may live in the world as it is, but you can still work to create the world as it should be. (Michelle Obama, *Becoming* 446)

[I]t privileges after Derrida, the trope of friendship as the most comprehensive philosophical signifier for all those invisible affective gestures that refuse alignment along the secure axes of filiation to seek expression outside, if not against. Possessive communities of belonging. (Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities* 10)

This chapter examines the autobiographical narratives of three famous Black American women of the twenty-first century—Michelle Obama, Susan Rice, and Kamala Harris—who have come to occupy some of the most privileged and coveted positions in the US society and administration. The chosen texts, as indicated in the title, are Michelle Obama's *Becoming* (2018), Susan Rice's *Tough Love: My Story of the Things Worth Fighting For* (2019), and Kamala Harris' *The Truths We Hold: An American Journey* (2019). These texts reflect the authors' attempts to bridge the gap between the private and the public. The fact that these writers document to some extent their very public lives under constant scrutiny of the media and their political detractors, indicates that they have something to tell. Their narratives are about their lives, their relations with their families and the public, and they also draw upon contemporary events and past history as they try to put their work and their views in perspective.

It is argued that these texts challenge the American autobiographical tradition as well as the Black American autobiographical tradition by working out a two-pronged strategy. On the one hand, these texts highlight how the authors move through a series of well-recorded struggles to positions of public importance and notice. These journeys are distinct in the sense that the authors make use of whatever opportunities come their way in spite of severe racial and sexual restrictions. To this extent, these texts are not celebrations of opportunities or condemnation of opportunities denied, a characteristic one associates with American autobiography, both White and Black. Having achieved some distinction in their respective fields, these writers adopt a politics of empathy and enabling, choosing to develop in their social set-up a project of community building, always enlarging the scope of the community thus built. In other words, they employ empathy and compassion along with a strong moral character as tools for social transformation and changes in political structure and instrumentation. It is in this respect that these autobiographical texts serve as exempla or illustrative examples for the community to follow. It needs to be noted here that Black lives can serve as tools for social change and in the same sense, Black autobiographical writings can serve as tools that shape this change. Arguably, these autobiographical texts record not so much individual as affective transformations of unprivileged Black girls into powerful Black women. The larger picture presented in this chapter is one of affective politics. The emphasis is not on criticism, resistance or revision but on enabling communities irrespective of affiliation to specific ideologies. The writers under scrutiny work through poverty and marginalization on their way to public success. However, they choose not to celebrate their success stories as in the bildungsroman. By choosing to thread through affective moments, these texts visualize communities that empower not only members who, in a narrow sense belong to their own groups, but to a larger world of multiracial, aspirational youth.

The objectives of the chapter are:

- To analyse select Black American women's autobiography in the light of reparation and the concept of affective communities
- To examine how public figures (especially Black women occupying public positions) re-order life's choices in order to push forward a politics of reparation (i.e. act and write in order to create a society where past fault lines are repaired)

- To examine how Black women writers in public positions reframe life and life-writing with public welfare as a major objective

This chapter rests on the following hypotheses:

- that the act of life-writing is more in the mode of re-telling/re-examining than recalling
- that the autobiographical texts of public figures return to lives in order to justify, and reframe choices made in life
- that recalling these choices recontextualize and revalidate perspectives that are not available when the choices are made

The texts document how these women use their positions of power and privilege to break racial barriers and establish grounds for more positive relations across racial or gender divides. Remaining true to their Black identity and unforgetting of their humble origins or early career struggles, they, nevertheless, eschew hatred to embody a politics guided by humility, empathy, clarity and hope. In so doing, they propose new relational possibilities whereby the identity category “Black American” no longer remains antithetical to being simply “American.” These texts show how they learn to get anchored in a politics of love and hope, and channel their energies in creating a heterogeneous society founded on “affective communities.” In their lives, these women fight to overcome sectarian notions of race-gender-class based differences. As writers, they use the medium of autobiography as a political tool in writing ‘forward’ to a future free of identity politics. Their autobiographical texts which are embodiments of their policies and politics carry the imprint of empathy, enabling and community empowerment.

The writers show how a politics of ‘affect’ can be a new and alternative mode of resistance. These texts under scrutiny are a response to the twenty-first century’s call for new strategies and modes of expression. The importance of these texts is borne out by the fact that studies on the contemporary Black American condition tend to focus on the insidious presence of race even amidst talks of a ‘postracial’ America. In her “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination” (1997), bell hooks presents this condition in a powerful passage:

In contemporary society, white and black people alike believe that racism no longer exists. This erasure...diffuses the representation of whiteness as terror in the black

imagination...Black people still feel the terror, still associate it with whiteness, but are rarely able to articulate the varied ways we are terrorized because *it is easy to silence by accusations of reverse racism....* (345; emphasis added)

Significantly, hooks argues that since race and race-based atrocities can no longer be overtly mentioned, the battle is now against a cloaked, nameless ideal. According to her, a false picture of racial and gender progress serves to cover the “terror” that Black Americans now have to deal with. There is a tendency amongst people, irrespective of skin colour, to avoid issues of racism. It is as if by ignoring it they can deny its reality. This has been the position of writers like Morrison who believe that racism has to be addressed as racism and that only by revisiting this bitter and troublesome issue can one look to bring change. Otherwise, denial of racism or racialised sexism would take over with the fallout that genuine concerns or critical discourses of race are dismissed as irrelevant banter or as “reverse racism.”

Ralina L. Joseph’s *Post Racial Resistance: Black Women, Media, and the Uses of Strategic Ambiguity* (2018) also points to the presence of racism in contemporary American lives. She argues that ‘postraciality’ tends to overexplain the idea of context and in the process signifies an ideology where racial hatred is muted but insistent. Joseph’s argument is that writers like Michelle Obama, Oprah Winfrey and Shonda Rhimes work around “racism” and “racialized sexism” (197) to move upward. Joseph also points out that public recognition comes to these women through “strategic” use of “ambiguity” (21), which translates into subtle silences and negotiations with prejudice. Her reading of these writers does not deal with the fact that these women do not hold on to their success. That said, raising questions regarding their strategic ambiguity in dealing with race restricts the scope of reading these texts. It is in this respect that the chapter engages with Black women’s autobiography consciously adopting a politics of love and hope. Instead of looking back with anger or remaining too obsessed with contemporary racial inequities, they look forward to a futuristic model of society where love and respect for all human beings is guaranteed. We argue that the authors under scrutiny consider their emphasis on building affective networks and communities as a better and more effective solution to America’s race problem and that such a response can actually be traced to a Black Feminist insistence on love as a political weapon. The chapter would try to define “affective communities” according to Leela Gandhi’s use of the term and would, then, also look into how such communities manifest themselves in Black Feminist ‘love politics.’

In her seminal work, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-De-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (2006), Leela Gandhi points out how ‘friendship’ has been a significant trope in the anticolonial struggle. Adding to Edward Said’s notions of “contrapuntality” and Homi Bhaba’s “hybridity,” Gandhi highlights how binary oppositions between colonizers and colonized were at times questioned and rejected even before the gradual process of hybridization rendered the construction of rigid binaries a near impossible task. Such challenge came from anticolonial thinkers from within the empire who were neither complicit in the imperial project of colonization nor participants in anticolonial nationalist claims of cultural purity. This challenge manifested itself not solely through dissolving binaries but by forging “new and better forms of community and relationality hitherto unimaginable within the monochromatic landscape of imperial divisions” (*Affective Communities* 6). Practitioners of Gandhi’s ‘affective politics,’ then, rejected both “occidental modernity” (5) and “anticolonial nationalist purity” (ibid) in favour of a new politics of friendship which made possible more meaningful equations and transactions between the colonizers and the colonized.

While the concept of “affective communities” was framed by Gandhi in the context of postcolonialism, the current chapter applies it as a model to understand the political stand maintained by the chosen authors. Challenging binary constructions of Black and White, the women under question create possibilities for the forging of a new space that better accommodates alliances across divisions. Their gesture of friendship is multidirectional: contending race-induced hatred politics, they reach out beyond the Black community to endorse a more cosmopolitan humanitarian approach, and yet as highly educated women with power and privilege and hence, participants in the Black bourgeoisie, they consciously elide divisions between Black bourgeois and proletarian culture to empathically connect with less privileged fellow Blacks. Their network of “affective communities” is, thus, spread across multiple axes of American society.

The chapter grounds the women’s desire for friendship and community empowerment in a Black feminist ethics of love. In “Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality” (2011), Jennifer C. Nash discusses how a persistent aspect of Black feminist thought has been its insistence on the power of love to bring about positive socio-political changes. This love, according to Nash, manifests itself in Black feminism’s “advocacy of the formation of affective political communities” (12). Such formations lead to a reconceptualization of the public sphere as new negotiations and

transactions continually keep altering the boundaries and scopes of that sphere. Nash argues that Black Feminist love-politics supports the formation of “heterogeneous” and fluid public spheres where the forms in which affective networks manifest themselves have not “solidified” into fixed ‘institutional,’ ‘organizational’ or such ‘identitarian’ patterns (13). Such a politics rooted in love helps overcome socio-historical disputes, ill-feelings or even traumatic experiences and memory and thereby, lays open the scope for forging friendlier, more positive relations. She writes:

[B]lack feminist love-politic “shed[s] new light on the possibilities of the public sphere,” imagining the public sphere as a site organized around a shared utopian vision rather than around a wounded, shared identity that demands recognition of the wound. (15)

“Utopianism” or the hope for an ideal society in the near future, then, forms the basis of black-feminist love-politics. This investment in the future rather than a preoccupation with the problems of the present is, then, another distinctive characteristic defining the politics of love and friendship that Nash talks about.

A viable politics rooted in love, friendship, and hope calls for collective, transformative action that looks forward to bringing about the desired change. Muñoz and Duggan, for instance, whom Nash cites, argues for an approach based on “could” rather than “ought”:

“Practicing educated hope is the enactment of a critique function. It is not about announcing the way things *ought* to be, but, instead, imagining what things *could* be.” (Muñoz and Duggan, p. 278; qtd. in Nash 17)

It is in this faith in the possibilities that the future holds, in all the things that “could” be achieved that we see the benefits of a radical politics committed to the cause of a collective good for all. Black feminist love-politics, like Leela Gandhi’s “affective communities,” endorses the hope for a ‘utopian’ society where differences do not translate into hostility but are instead transcended in the interest of a common cause.

The authors discussed in this chapter are well-known, famous personalities as already stated. Michelle Obama (b.-1964) served as the first Black FLOTUS (First Lady of the United States) from 2009-2017 during the two terms of presidency of her husband, Barack Obama. Susan Rice (b.-1964), currently serving in the position of Director of the

United States Domestic Policy Council, had, at the time of writing the autobiography, finished serving as US Ambassador to the United Nations (2009-2013) and then National Security Advisor (2013- 2017) in the Obama administration. Kamala Harris (b.-1964) is the current and first female Vice President of the US and at the time of composing the autobiography was serving her term as the United States senator from California. The autobiographies were published around the same time as President Obama completed his terms of presidency and the new President Donald Trump assumed power. All three are Democrats and see Trump’s presidency as predictive of a period of political doom. Privy to some of the innermost details of the US administration owing to their positions, they also realize and reveal in their autobiographies the extent of racial prejudice that still characterizes parts of the administrative machinery. However, as this chapter aims to enunciate, what stands out predominantly in the texts is their preoccupation with retaining hope under all circumstances, genuine feelings of love for America and Americans and their efforts to build “affective communities” across all divisions.

### **Becoming (2018)**

Michelle Obama’s *Becoming* documents the author’s journey from being an ordinary Black girl from the south side of Chicago to becoming the first Black FLOTUS—First Lady of the United States—and the consequent challenges she had to face. It is a journey marked by numerous obstacles. Yet, it is one that endorses the power of hope and resilience in overcoming all hardships, negativity and backlash. Published after the end of Barack Obama’s second term of Presidency, the text is chronologically arranged into three parts—“Becoming Me,” “Becoming Us” and “Becoming More”—with each part dedicated to a different phase of the author’s life.

The first part, “Becoming Me” starts with Obama’s early childhood through her days at Princeton and Harvard Law School and finally deals with the formative years of her career as a young lawyer in Sidley Austin law firm. This initial part shows the contribution of her parents—Fraser and Marian Robinson towards shaping her worldviews and defining her identity as an independent woman. “Becoming Us” finds the author meeting her future husband, Barack Obama, their courtship period followed by marriage and the start of their family. It also highlights her role in the growing political career of her husband and her decision to leave the corporate sector and contribute to community service via participation in non-profit organizations as a way of complementing the



political goals and agendas of her husband. This second part concludes with Barack Obama winning the 2008 election to be declared the 44<sup>th</sup> President elect of the United States. The final section “Becoming More,” as indicated by the section heading, sees the author transcending her identity as merely “Michelle Obama” in order to grapple with her newly defined role as the FLOTUS—a role which becomes all the more fraught with difficulties and complications owing to her being the first Black American woman to assume that title.

From her initial representation in the media as unbefitting the grace and dignity that should be characteristic of a potential First Lady to being hailed as one of the most popular fashionistas and icons of the twenty-first century, Michelle Obama has been witness to a complete transformation and reversal in the public’s appraisal of her. She has been able to overcome all racist and sexist stereotyping and establish positive self-images in the popular imagination. In this regard, Joseph in *PostRacial Resistance* has tried to look into how Obama has managed to bring about such tremendous positive changes in her public representation. In talking about her transformation—from being attacked with “astoundingly racist and sexist vitriol” to being eulogized by the public as “mom-in-chief, down-to-earth fashionista” (41)—Joseph posits the following questions:

What happened to precipitate such a flip? Did the country somehow magically become less racist and sexist, or did Michelle Obama do something to win the hearts and minds of America? (41-42)

She finds the answer in what she sees as the author’s employment of “strategic ambiguity” (21), a subtle, coded form of resistance as already mentioned earlier. Instead of outrightly rebelling against her early representations as “unpatriotic, unfeminine, emasculating, and untrustworthy,” Obama, according to Joseph, showed the possibility of reverting these negative images imposed upon her by carefully reformulating her earlier speeches.

This strategy, Joseph maintains, is manifested in the First Lady’s framing of her subsequent public speeches in terms of her “patriotism,” “Americanness” and most importantly, in the presentation of her story as an epitomizing of the “American Dream.” Her counternarrative to the media’s initial narrativizing of her person in highly racist and misogynistic terms was, then, not the typical one: it was a highly coded narrative which emphasized the fulfillment of the American Dream in her overcoming of all socio-economic barriers and becoming successful. In the words of Joseph,

This narrative was one of moving from lack of economic opportunity and racialized specificity to wealth and postracial universalism. This narrative wasn't false; it was partial and it had an agenda. Obama's story was contingent upon silences and exclusions as she omitted the realities of structural, institutional, and historical racism affecting the South Side of Chicago" (6).

Obama's narrative, through its silences, looks beyond the narrowness and racism, to a wider audience with empathy and humanitarianism.

Obama's stress on the framing of a 'patriotic' narrative which gives due credit to the unique opportunities for personal and familial upliftment that America as a nation offered without focusing on the racial or gendered barriers to such achievement is seen by the critic in terms of her "strategic ambiguity." Indeed, both Barack and Michelle Obama, throughout their campaigning and two terms of presidency, focused on the unity and the capacity to transcend differences that, according to them, have always defined America and Americans. This refusal to overtly name race and racial prejudices while also carefully pushing her way into public acceptance is, according to Joseph, a manifestation of the First Lady's use of "strategic ambiguity."

This chapter, however, as already argued in the beginning, seeks to understand Obama's focus on unity, hope and empathy not only in terms of her forging of a counternarrative but in the context of a desire to truly overcome differences by investing in a politics of friendship. Her autobiography, *Becoming* is a fitting demonstration of this politics that guides her ideologies. Indeed, the third and final section of the text, which focuses on the author's official tenures as First Lady, shows her being baffled by the media's infringement upon every bit of her life and its attempts at dissecting every aspect of her personality. It depicts her struggles to balance the demands of her family life—most significantly her apprehensions regarding her role in what would have been a 'normal' and 'proper' upbringing of her daughters—Sasha and Malia—with the professional expectations and obligations incumbent on a First Lady. However, "Becoming More" mainly depicts the author's determination to use her position, irrespective of the limitations, as a way of ensuring maximum community participation thereby, also paving the way for maximizing community empowerment. Obama already sees for herself a role that is more than that of a wife, mother and woman. In fact, she retrospectively sees herself expanding into a more inclusive person so that she can do more by fitting into more roles.

The section starts with an acknowledgement of what may be seen as the ‘confusing’ position of a First Lady:

There is no handbook for incoming First Ladies of the United States. It’s not technically a job, nor is it an official government title...It’s a strange kind of sidecar to the presidency, a seat that...had already been occupied by more than forty-three different women, each of whom had done it in her own way. (339)

In the absence of well-defined guidelines or set obligations, the responsibility falls on the shoulders of the concerned First Lady to define and decide her own course of action. While this flexibility might have its own freedom, it also comes with the pressure, as the author realizes, to devise strategies, plans and goals that conform to public expectations. And as the first Black First lady, Obama well realizes that the demands upon her and the grounds on which she would be judged would be very different from what had been faced by preceding First Ladies. This is more so, given the pressures of her racial identity:

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 “other” almost by default. If there was a presumed grace assigned to my white predecessors, I knew it wasn’t likely to be the same for me. (ibid)

Passages such as this indicate Obama’s initial sense of alienation from the purely ‘White’ legacy of the White House. At different points in the text, the author keeps referring to the unique challenges that comes with being Black. As a Black First Lady, Obama understands that unlike her White predecessors who were perhaps judged in terms of their action alone, her colour and racial identity would be subjected to public scrutiny before her acts. Continuing with her deliberations on the hurdles ensured by her Black American identity, she says:

My grace would need to be earned...[M]any Americans wouldn’t see themselves reflected in me...they wouldn’t relate to my journey...[N]ot for one second did I think I’d be sliding into some glamorous, easy role. Nobody who has the words “first” and “black” attached to them ever would. I stood at the foot of the mountain, knowing I’d need to climb my way into favor. (340)

It is important to note, however, that she consciously rejects any bitterness in this retrospective ordering of facts. Much to the contrary, she exhibits an eagerness to ‘work’ her way into acceptance.

As Obama repeatedly keeps asserting in her text, her way of “earning” her grace involves conscientious efforts to be of service to the people. It is with this intention that she initiates all her community driven projects. In her capacity as First Lady, Obama initiates three major projects. First, there is the plantation of a White House Garden which expands into her “Let’s Move” campaign focused on fighting childhood obesity. The second is an initiative named “Joining Forces” jointly started with then Vice President Joe Biden’s wife, Jill Biden, which had as its primary target the providing of emotional and financial support to military families as well as educational aid to military children. Finally, there is her project called “Reach Higher,” initiated with the objective of providing mentorship and financial assistance to young students. These initiatives by the author are all designed with the express intention of reaching out to what to she sees as social concerns that need attention. They are a part of the larger objective to inspire and instigate change.

As Obama mentions, the projects help her take up meaningful jobs within or as part of the White House, while remaining aloof from intervening in her husband’s actual politics. More than her own self-fashioning, however, these jobs help to fashion exempla, ideal acts, for the community to follow. As she provides an inclusive lead that combines aesthetic and wellness concerns, the move transcends its specific context. Community service, she believes, can give her the opportunity to engage in a positive manner with the media’s near constant gaze upon her every move and help her define the priorities and goals that she has set for herself as First Lady. When she initially kickstarts her project of improving the overall health of children across the country with the plantation of the White House garden, she is aware that this might not work for people at large. Noting the constant pressure to perform, she writes:

The garden was popular...wholesome, but I also knew that for some people it wouldn’t feel like enough. I understood that I was being watched with a certain kind of anticipation, especially by women, maybe especially by professional working women, who wondered whether I’d bury my education and management experience to fold myself into some prescribed First Lady pigeonhole. (382)

As First Lady and especially as a Black First Lady, Obama recognises that she has to excel in all dimensions of her life—personal as well as professional. If she focused more on her work life, she risked being castigated as ‘unfeminine’ or being stereotyped into the image of the ‘strong Black woman’ who ‘emasculated’ her man as was exemplified in the public criticism of her during the campaign days. On the other hand, an absolute concentration on the domestic dimension invited critiques from women and especially feminists who considered it a negative influence on common women’s professional ambitions and goals. In this context, Obama refers to her campaign days when on being interviewed regarding the role she would assume if her husband gets elected as the President, she answered that it would be a continuation of the role she was already performing—“mom in chief” of the Obama family. While this comment was applauded by a section of the people as being respectful of the highly demanding task of raising children, certain others read it as an indication of her failure to understand the professional requirements incumbent on a First Lady. Commenting on such narrow straitjacketing of her roles, she writes:

The truth was, I intended to do everything--to work with purpose and parent with care—same as I always had. The only difference now was that a lot of people were watching. (ibid)

Being made the object of a constant gaze with even the minutest of her decisions being dissected by the media and the public, the First Lady has to carefully manoeuvre through every project that she upholds or endorses. As she mentions in the autobiography, “optics” (387)—how one is presented to the outside world, governs the life of the First Family always. What adds to the pressure and anxiety, then, is the knowledge that as First Lady, she cannot go public with any of her apprehensions, can never allow her physical expressions to betray her real feelings. Obama metaphorically refers to this condition when she compares herself to a swan gliding on a lake:

I felt sometimes like a swan on a lake, knowing that my job was in part to glide and appear serene, while underwater I never stopped pedaling my legs. (383)

Under the apparent lavishness and glamour of life in the White House, then, there can be tremendous emotional anxiety. Obama responds to this anxiety by committing herself to proactive service. In fact, this worked to her advantage as the service undertaken demanded collective efforts by like-minded people committed to the cause, thus, giving her the scope to expand her fold.

While working on her “Let’s Move” campaign dedicated to fighting childhood obesity, for instance, the author realises that the task demanded effective networking not only amongst her team members. More than that, there was the need for the building of a unique community of commercial/corporate houses as well as non-profit organisations committed to the cause. She understands that childhood obesity was a problem that could be traced to multiple factors ranging from the exorbitant prices of organic food products to the chain of commercial houses profiting on the marketing and distributing of unhealthy packaged foods and beverages. She also realises that the success of the initiative depended on rooting out these factors. Her next step was to bring the corporate giants who regulated the market to her side and convince them of the importance and urgency of improving children’s nutrition and health. In all of these, Obama’s mode of operation is based on inclusion rather than coercion:

When it came to dealing with the CEOs of soft drink companies and school-lunch suppliers, I thought it was worth making a human appeal as opposed to a regulatory one, to collaborate rather than pick a fight. And when it came to the way families actually lived, I wanted to speak directly to moms, dads, and especially kids. (391)

The “human appeal,” then, remains the guiding principle in all of her commitments as First Lady. In her autobiography, Obama recounts the connections she had helped establish amongst different organizations—the American Beverage Association, the American Academy of Paediatrics, television and media houses such as Disney, NBC, Warner Bros, big retailers like Wal-Mart—all in the united attempt to curb the rising issue of obesity amidst children.

It is in such positive use of the “huge platform” that the position of FLOTUS offers that Obama finds a sense of purpose and meaning beyond being a mere “sidecar” to the President. Talking about how such service helped define the course of her actions and the roles she set for herself, she comments:

I was beginning to realize that all...that felt odd to me about my new existence—the strangeness of fame, the hawk-eyed attention paid to my image, the vagueness of my job description—could be marshalled in service of real goals. I was energized. Here, finally, was a way to show my full self. (392)

Obama, then, locates the realisation of her “full self” and potential in the rendering of measurable community service. She creates a huge community unified only by its purpose: “a network of advocates, a chorus of voices speaking up for children and their health” (401). Throughout her two tenures as First Lady, she directs her efforts towards a continual extension of the boundaries demarcating her networks as well as towards maximising the number of beneficiaries benefitting from her community projects.

This same zeal towards building affective communities rooted in love, empathy, sense of service, hope and resilience is again what guides the author in her subsequent projects: “Joining Forces” and “Reach Higher.” Through the “Joining Forces” project, Obama, along with Jill Biden, reaches out to “support the military community and raise its visibility” (ibid). Here again, they seek to build a larger empathic community that would together work for the purpose:

I...reached out to the country’s most powerful CEOs, generating commitments to hire a significant number of veterans and military spouses. Jill would garner pledges from colleges and universities to train teachers and professors to better understand the needs of military children. (401-402)

Obama’s efforts to garner public interest and empathy for those afflicted or affected by different forces shows the inadequacy of mere laws and policies to ensure social change. An egalitarian society based on mutual understanding, cooperation and social justice demands the coming together of disparate social elements and groups willing to transcend their differences for a collective good.

Apart from continuing with her earlier campaigns and initiatives, the project that Obama focuses on during her second term as FLOTUS is the one named “Reach Higher”—a White House initiative to make higher education easily accessible to all sections of the society by providing counselling, mentorship and financial aid to the needy. The author recounts how her own confidence as a child had been constantly buttressed by her family as well as her mentors and teachers who infused her mind with the “simple message: *You matter*” (435). It is this same message and legacy of self-belief that Obama seeks to pass on to new generations of American children, adolescents and young adults as they prepare to enter “a global job market” (434).

In all her initiatives, then, Obama, notwithstanding her position as FLOTUS, remains grounded in her roots. Through a worldview powered by love and hope she seeks to empower as many people, groups and identities as possible, irrespective of any narrow definitions of identity that boils down to race, gender or sexuality. Early after Barack Obama's assumption of presidency, when she makes her first official tour of England as First Lady during the 2009 G20 summit, she makes a visit to a public girls' school there named Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School. The majority of the students, "more than 90 percent of the school's nine hundred students" (373) consisted of Blacks, different ethnic minorities while about a fifth were children with immigrant history. Obama asserts how such visits, unlike the highly politicised nature of her husband's meetings, allowed her a chance to go beyond authorities and policy makers to meet the 'actual' people who lived in such places. Looking at the girls, the author immediately is able to visualise the struggles and battles they would have to win as marginalised and minority people:

I knew they'd have to push back against...stereotypes...all the ways they'd be defined before they'd had a chance to define themselves. They'd need to fight the invisibility that comes with being poor, female, and of color. They'd have to work to find their voices and not be diminished, to keep themselves from getting beaten down. (374)

But the very next moment, she is able to see how these girls, despite their conditions have been able to sustain their hope and resilience. Continuing with her ruminations on the girls, she writes:

But their faces were hopeful, and now so was I. For me it was a strange, quiet revelation: They were me, as I'd once been. And I was them, as they could be. The energy I felt...had nothing to do with obstacles. It was the power of nine hundred girls striving. (ibid)

It is hope and fortitude that binds her to these girls and connects them to her own past. Obama's success is a living example of the power of kind words and encouragement proffered by people's belief in one's abilities: "My early successes in life were, I knew, a product of the consistent love and high expectations with which I was surrounded as a child, both at home and at school" (434). If she could overcome all obstacles and come all the way from Euclid Avenue in the South Side of Chicago to the White House, then anyone and everyone else could. Guided by this principle, she takes the girls of the school to visit



Oxford as part of a mentorship program later on and assures them that they too, could belong there. The message, as she recounts, was always the same—the one she herself had been imparted with:

*You belong. You matter. I think highly of you.* (435)

This undaunting belief in the nurturing power of love and in its efficacy in bringing about meaning oriented change drives most of Obama's politics, then, as has been repeatedly asserted in this chapter.

During her visit to Harper High School in West Englewood where episodes of gang violence were rampant, the author maintains this same staunch belief in the power of persistence, patience, hope and resilience. While she accepts the bleak picture that presented itself when it came to any solid, tangible political measures adopted to counter gang insurgency, she still motivates the students of Harper that the answer to the scenario lay in their ability to hold on. Just as she had taken the girls of Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School to Oxford, she takes a group of students from Harper to Howard University where she hopes and wishes the students could see their true potential. Unpretentious of any vain pride in the power of her position as First Lady to transform lives, "I will never pretend that words or hugs from a First Lady alone can turn somebody's life around" (439), she nevertheless understands how changing a narrative of doom and despair can go a long way in boosting self-belief:

But I was there to push back against the old and charming narrative about being a black urban kid in America, the one that foretold failure and then hastened its arrival. If I could point out those students' strengths and give them some glimpse of a way forward, then I would always do it. It was a small difference I could make. (ibid)

In all her community-oriented services, thus, Obama seems to be inspired by a black feminist insistence on the power of love and hope to shape a desired future. Rather than focusing on what "ought" to be there, she shows an interest in investing on all that "could" be achieved.

*Becoming* is also Obama's tribute to all the relations that she had been able to forge, all the "affective communities" she had managed to build both within and beyond the premises of the White House. When she had initially started living in the White House as

a resident, Obama along with her husband had set about the task of “democratising” it by relaxing many of the rigid formalities that defined life within it. This had been sought to be done by introducing as minute changes as making the art and decorative pieces on the walls of the White House more inclusive—adding more works by Black American artists for instance. The elitist culture was also challenged by providing the butlers—in case of days unmarked by any formal events—a choice of donning a more casual dress of khaki and golf-shirt if they so wanted, by opening the doors of the White House to more and more kids and military families and by initiating such other small changes. Over time, Obama establishes more human relations with the staffs at their service, even managing to recognise many of them from their voices and always taking extra precaution so as to never make them feel “invisible” (369). As the author writes:

Life was better, always, when we could measure the warmth. (369)

This warmth, Obama tried to ensure, radiated to all her employees through establishing familiar, friendly relations based on mutual respect.

Finally, even though she recognizes that her experiences as the first Black First Lady might have been very different from all preceding First Ladies, it is in this “continuum” (347), this unique community formed of all previous as well as all forthcoming First Ladies who are to occupy that privileged position in the future, that she places herself in. To quote Obama:

As different as we all were, we’d always share this bond. (346)

This ability to look beyond differences and value bonds and connections informs the author’s larger perspective of the nation as well. Although the Epilogue betrays her apprehensions regarding the incumbent Trump administration, it is on a note of optimism that she concludes her autobiography:

I continue...to keep myself connected to a force that’s larger and more potent than any one election, or leader, or news story—and that’s optimism. For me, this is a form of faith, an antidote to fear. (469)

Obama’s autobiography, thus, finds its author unapologetically grounding herself in an ethics of love and friendship. Invested in her dream of a better America, she looks forward to it with hope and optimism guiding her along.

### *Tough Love* (2019)

Like Michelle Obama's *Becoming*, Susan Rice's *Tough Love* was also written and published at the end of Barack Obama's presidency during which she served initially as the US ambassador to the UN and then, as National Security Advisor. Rice's autobiography documents some of the upheavals that have marked her political career, the repercussions or ramifications of which could also be felt in her personal life. However, the current chapter argues that it should also be credited as a testament to the enduring power of love, hope and faith. "Tough love," almost an oxymoron, suggests how love, especially in the context of a politically charged figurative battlefield, can empower and confer upon people, burdened with the weight of decision-making for the entire nation and indeed at times the entire world, the courage to take ethically correct even if personally painstaking decisions. It is also suggestive of the friendship and solidarity that sustains any community during tough times.

A major push behind writing her autobiography, as Rice mentions in the "Prologue" was to assuage herself of the accusations and assaults with which she had been charged after the 2012 Benghazi incident. On September 11, 2012, the American diplomatic facilities in Benghazi had been attacked and four American officials—ambassador J. Christopher Stevens, foreign service officer Sean Smith, and two CIA contractors, Tyrone S. Woods and Glen Doherty—had been killed during the violence. In the aftermath of the incident, Rice had appeared, in her then official capacity as US ambassador to the UN, "on the September 16, 2012, Sunday shows, all five of them—ABC's *This Week*, CBS's *Face the Nation*, NBC's *Meet the Press*, Fox News Sunday, and CNN's *State of the Union*" (310). After the interviews, her statements had been subjected to all sorts of distortions and misinterpretations leading ultimately to her portrayal as incompetent and untrustworthy. *Tough Love*, written after the end of her service in the Obama administration as already mentioned, provides her with the medium and the opportunity to present the story from her point of view and thereby, clear her name from the episode with which she had almost become "synonymous." As she writes:

Ever since my name became synonymous with Benghazi, I have wanted to tell my story. Almost overnight, I went from being a respected if relatively low-profile cabinet official to a nationally notorious villain or heroine, depending on one's political perspective and what cable news channel you watch. (16)

Rice's autobiography is an answer to her long-cherished wish to give voice to her personal account. She had been unduly vilified and focused on when she indeed, as she explains later in an entire chapter dedicated to the Benghazi incident, was in no way a key figure in the entire episode. Continuing with her defence against such vilification or heroization by different media houses, she asserts:

I am neither. The portrayals of me on both sides are superficial and uninformed by who I am and where I come from, by what motivates and truly defines me. (ibid)

The author, thus, detaches herself from all media representations, which positive or accusatory, were in any case a distortion or exaggeration of the actual thing. In the Prologue, she further justifies how her desire to tell her story had been thwarted so far because of her official position as an insider in the administration and how that repression had been affecting her all the while:

I could not tell my own story—until I left government. When I was a senior official who spoke publicly, I was speaking on behalf of the United States of America and our president...It's hard to convey how frustrating that feels, especially when the public portrayal is false or demeaning. (ibid)

Rice uses her autobiography as an outlet to the emotions she had been holding within her. It gives her the chance finally to define her image—whether public or private—in terms of how she would like to see herself or be presented. Her personal narrative is meant as a counter to the media's hitherto "false or demeaning" representation of her.

In digging her memories five years after the Benghazi incident to tell her side of the story, she also inevitably looks at all the experiences which had helped shape her personal and political outlooks and made her believe in the power of remaining tough in hard times. In that process, the autobiography also becomes a means to pass on to coming generations the "tough love" lessons that her life had taught her: love can proffer strength in times of adversity, can provide the courage to sacrifice/compromise for the greater good of one's community/society if and when the situation demands it. Rice's political career, as recounted in her autobiography, exemplifies how love, often regarded as a highly subjective and personal emotion, surpasses all narrow barriers to become a potent means of effecting positive societal/political transformation. In highlighting the power of love to

alter social reality and foster a more just future, her autobiography becomes an endorsement of the basic tenets of Black feminist love-politics.

Rice's *Tough Love* begins with an acknowledgement of how her life is a reflection of the family values that had been deeply implanted in her. Her ancestors from both sides—maternal and paternal—were classic cases of realising the American Dream. Her maternal grandparents had immigrated from Jamaica to the US in search of better work opportunities, worked very hard upon getting those opportunities, and promised to themselves that their children would earn a decent education and live better lives than the ones they themselves had been forced to live. Her paternal grandparents, on the other hand, were descendants of slaves but they too had struggled to rise above that ancestry and give their future generations a better life and education.

Indeed, as a way of linking her political beliefs and career with the values that she had imbibed from her family, Rice starts the initial chapters of her autobiography which deals with her family history and early life with italicized ruminations on her time “leading up to and including the Obama years” (18). In these early chapters, Rice creates a link connecting her own family principles with what she considered as Barack Obama's visionary thoughts about America. Commenting on Obama, she writes:

He was neither an icon of the civil rights era nor a “race-man”...He was a new American leader...[H]e spoke movingly of one America—“Not a liberal America and a conservative America, there's the United States of America.” For the first time in my life, I had found a political leader to whom I could completely relate and who excited me. (22)

In Barack Obama's vision for a ‘united’ America, Rice finds a political model worth idealising and emulating. It is this politics driven by the dream of a united nation that ultimately marks the author's own personal and professional aspirations as well.

After penning down these reflections on Obama's visionary ideals at the outset of her first chapter, she goes on to show how this America based on the “fundamental equality” (23) of everyone was the one her ancestors had always hoped for and believed in. In her words:

This is the same America in which my family, the Dicksons and the Rices, believes. These are the values that my parents and grandparents instilled in me. (23)

By focusing on the success story of her grandparents despite rampant racial prejudices, Rice speaks for America as a nation of opportunities and possibilities. These scopes and avenues for betterment can be sustained and amplified, her autobiography asserts, only when there is a sense of community, mutual sharing, and a recognition of one's moral obligation to give back to society what one has received. This ethics on which she had been grounded by her family—one that emphasised bearing responsibility towards the society she came from, which also seemed to be the guiding principle of her political role-model Barack Obama—directs her entire life. Continuing with the lessons she had been imparted with by her family, Rice adds:

They raised me to remember where we came from. To honor the richness of my inheritance, value myself, do my best, and never let others convince me I can't. With good fortune came responsibility, they taught me; therefore, my duty was to serve others, in whatever way best suited my talents. (23-24)

These teachings form the crux of her life and guide her professional life. As a Black American woman, she can remain true to her roots, be respectful of her Black heritage, and yet can embrace the wider world.

The sense of service, Rice asserts, was “embedded in [her] genes and seared into [her] soul” (26). Stressing on the call for service that had been dutifully followed by each generation of her family in their own ways, she mentions:

My forebears on both sides heeded the call to serve, to pay back far more than they were grateful to receive. (ibid)

It is this desire to serve, to give back to the community that prompts her maternal grandfather to dedicate the insurance money received after the premature death of his youngest son, Frederick to Bowdoin College “as an annuity” (34) honouring his dead son. Rice can see the big-heartedness on the part of her grandfather who, notwithstanding his own meagre annual income that never exceeded \$5000, could willingly give away the \$10000 insurance payout for what he knew was a much nobler cause. This financial assistance, which has continued till date, was named the “Mary M. and David A. Dickson scholarship fund” on the death of her grandfather and, as the author comments, is a living embodiment of her family's devotion towards the society at large.

In a similar manner, her great-grandfather on her father's side, Walter Allen Simpson Rice—himself “born a slave in South Carolina” (36)—had on gaining his freedom, nevertheless, sought to educate other former slaves. His efforts had ultimately resulted in the foundation of the Manual Training and Industrial School for Colored Youth, more popularly known as the Bordentown School. Bordentown, Rice writes, although founded by a slave went on to become a centre of excellence producing many successful Black Americans until it was compelled to shut down in 1955 after the 1954 *Brown v/s Board of Education* made segregated education unlawful.

Re-visiting her formative years, retelling lives of her family members gives her the opportunity to offer her family's acts of sacrifice and service as exempla for the community. It also shows how investing in the community is both a privilege and a duty of the American. The writing of her autobiography, thus, lends Rice a perspective to the specifics of her life that was not available otherwise. It makes her see how the necessity/need to serve others so as to enable community empowerment is something she learnt from and therefore, attributes to her own family. Born into a family legacy of unflinching devotion to education and community service, the sense of obligation towards her country and countrypeople, Rice's autobiography suggests, comes naturally to her. It is this attitude of always remaining responsible and attentive to the greater cause and always being mindful of the repercussions of one's actions on other people's lives that determines her course of action after being wrongly accused and labelled in the Benghazi affair.

As stated earlier, Rice's decision to appear in all five shows on the Sunday of 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2012, proves devastating in terms of her political career as well as her personal life. She was not only maligned and defamed, but her professional competence and ethical grounding was questioned and doubted. The American and international media almost resorted to a sort of ‘witch-hunting’ in her portrayal. The attacks were so vicious that Rice's eight-year-old daughter unable to process and handle the media's negative representation of her mother started hallucinating about a man coming to attack her. Although she recovered with time, her daughter's development of a psychic problem, though temporary, indicates the amount of mental harassment she and her family faced on account of such vilification. What amplified the family's pain was the sheer ferocity with which the media presented Rice as distorting and hiding facts from the public when there were ample proofs to the contrary.

The defamation which led to doubts regarding her credibility and merit also deterred her political advancement when her potential nomination for the portfolio of the Secretary of State met with heavy criticism, doubts and debates. Political detractors capitalised on the controversy to discredit her, and through her the Obama administration. Indeed, Rice became the face with which to attack the supposed failure of the administration in countering terrorist attacks and upholding the trust of Americans. The assaults became so vicious that at one point she made the decision to compromise and refuse her nomination in accordance with media demands.

While the Benghazi incident and Rice's implication in it was widely televised and well-known to many, her autobiography offers readers first-hand insights into the personal toll it took on her life, her thoughts regarding it, and the motivations behind her decision to back away from being nominated as the Secretary of State. On reading her account of the entire episode, one can begin to see her response as an epitomising of the idea of "tough love" that she proposes and promotes. Rice recounts the conversation with her mother where she explains her decision of backing out, asserting that it was in no way a passive acceptance of guilt or a meek surrender to opponents. Stressing on her larger perspective, she argues:

"First, I don't think it is worth the demolition derby—to myself, our family, and the president's priorities. It's a manufactured controversy and a political hit job. But it isn't worth fighting just because I feel vilified...[T]here are bigger things than my ego, my reputation, or even my perceived integrity. Things like our policy priorities and our country." (330-331)

Rice's decision is an exhibition of extraordinary courage and grace during tough times. It is one that rises above narrow personal interests and instead is guided by love for the country and maintenance of its internal harmony. As the deeply rooted principles imprinted upon her mind and soul direct her, she places the call for duty towards her nation above all private considerations.

Rice's autobiography gives readers a new perspective to contextualise her post-Benghazi media and consequently public reception as well as her own reactions and responses. Consciously rejecting any response dictated by hatred, she takes the measure of love and service to her nation as the most effective answer to her defamation. As she writes:



My revenge was simple: to continue serving my country undaunted and unbound.  
(339)

Reflecting on the events that precipitated in the aftermath of the Benghazi attack, Rice argues, has helped her learn and grow from them. As she mentions in her autobiography, she has learnt important, practical lessons—such as being extra careful about giving media appearances, building professional networks who would stand up for her, or maintaining friendly working terms with the media—from the events that unfurled in the wake of the incident. But the most significant lesson, according to her, has been a reaffirmation of her commitment to serve and prioritise the nation above everything else.

Rice’s autobiography provides her with an opportunity to see the lessons acquired from her own family and those gathered in the course of her professional career together as a seamless narrative emphasizing unity over differences. Her father, who had been a member of the Tuskegee Airmen and had gone on to become governor of the Federal Reserve, had, nevertheless, seen how racial prejudices threatened Black people’s growth. And yet he had been adamant in his belief that race could never hold back a person who truly worked hard to set himself/herself free from its clutches. As Rice writes about her father:

Despite all this, my father was a deeply patriotic American. He traveled the world extensively and recognized the exceptional nature of America, its democracy, its values and its institutions...Until he died...my father’s life was a mission to prove America wrong about race. (42-43)

Her father had tried to impart these same lessons to her. From her father, the author had learnt the power of hope, fortitude, and resilience. And she had seen those principles, inherited from her father and other family members, challenged and reinforced by her own life experiences.

The circuit seems to be completed when her own son, Jake—with his very different nature and inclinations—teach her the same thing: the possibility of harmonious existence despite differences of thoughts and opinions. Talking about her relationship with Jake who, with his Republican leanings, had a completely different set of political ideologies, Rice writes:

Jake and I agree that we cannot allow our differences to overshadow what we have in common—an abiding bond of family and country—even in the most testing times. (468)

Using her own family as a model, Rice concludes her autobiography by reemphasising her vision for America. Despite the fact that America had been historically divided along race lines, it still was more united than divided. To quote the last few lines from her autobiography:

For better, for worse, we are in this together. And we cannot afford to part.

That’s why I remain fundamentally optimistic about America. We have overcome far greater challenges as a people, a nation, and a global leader.

No one has ever won by betting against America’s long-term capacity for growth, change, and renewal. (483)

In the face of what Rice sees as political despondency set in by the new Trump administration, her autobiography asserts the power of the common people to rise above hopelessness and together turn the dream of a united nation to reality. Shaped into a narrative that imagines the nation in terms of a wide, extended family, the author makes a case for the enduring power of love in difficult times.

### ***The Truths We Hold (2019)***

In the preface to her autobiography, *The Truths We Hold*, Kamala Harris quotes the following lines from Thurgood Marshall’s July 4, 1992 speech:

“Democracy just cannot flourish amid fear. Liberty cannot bloom amid hate. Justice cannot take root amid rage. America must get to work....We must dissent from the indifference. We must dissent from the apathy. We must dissent from the fear, the hatred, and the mistrust.” (10)

The preface portrays a grim picture of America and American politics under the Trump administration—an atmosphere marked by distrust, racial prejudices, police atrocities, unfair incarceration and a mockery of all basic humanitarian values and ideals. However, much like Marshall’s call to rise above fear, prejudice or mistrust, if only to sustain the core of democracy, Harris’ autobiography is intended to be a plea for change-oriented meaningful action. Affirmative action, the author argues, is possible when ‘truths’, no matter how bitter or painful, is confronted and analysed. In the context of a bleak political

environment where hatred looms large, only an unhindered laying bare of truths can help dispel public paranoia and re-build trust, the cornerstone of any democratic setup. To quote the author:

I believe there is no more important and consequential antidote for these times than a reciprocal relationship of trust. You give and you receive trust. And one of the most important ingredients in a relationship of trust is that we speak truth. (11)

Harris, then, begins with the belief that all fissures in American politics could be repaired only by investing in public trust. In order to redeem America and its glory, both the state and the people must enter into a conversation whereby the nation's most vital truths are divulged, discussed and accounted for. To quote Harris again:

We cannot solve our most intractable problems unless we are honest about what they are, unless we are willing to have difficult conversations and accept what facts make plain.

We need to speak truth: that racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and anti-Semitism are real in this country, and we need to confront those forces. (11)

It is only when the reality of the problems affecting a country is accepted, can action be taken in that regard. Harris uses the autobiographical mode not to recall her political choices and interventions but to return to America the basics of the American ideal.

*The Truths We Hold* unpacks the truths of her life in order that the text forwards her politics of reparation, and her fellow Americans learn from the lessons and small bits of wisdom that she has managed to gather in the course of her journey. In the process, the book holds a mirror to the ugly societal realities she gets to see and confront by virtue of her association with the legal system and the US Senate. Harris—like Michelle Obama and Susan Rice—uses the medium of her autobiography not just to point to the darkness that overwhelms the nation, but to assure people that those dark facts are reversible and that they can be altered through mutual trust and collective social action. In so doing, she centres her work around “affective communities” irrespective of kinship or filial relations and advocates the idea of reparation in which love and friendship become credible political tools of effecting change.

Towards this end, she gleans the memories of a whole community of friends, family and well-wishers who have all left behind imprints of their contributions in her work. As in Michelle Obama and Susan Rice, we find in Harris a person who remains rooted to her origins and ever grateful to an ever-expanding community even as she gets into the centre of power and privilege. Similar to Rice, who starts her autobiographical narrative by situating the bases of her political sensibilities in the values and principles inherited from her family, Harris begins her autobiography by crediting the way her personality had been shaped by the academic fervour and activist sentiments that were a part of her upbringing. Born to immigrant parents with high academic qualifications and expectations—her Jamaican father, Donald Harris, was a professor of Economics at Stanford University and Indian mother, Shyamala Gopalan was a researcher obsessed with developing a cure for breast cancer—she witnesses the Civil Rights Movement and protests even as a toddler. This is when she realises the importance of education and develops an intrepid activist desire for change. Harris records how her mother had inherited her activist inclinations from her own parents who were politically aware and active. To quote her:

[F]rom both of my grandparents, my mother developed a keen political consciousness. She was conscious of history, conscious of struggle, conscious of inequities. She was born with a sense of justice imprinted on her soul. (17)

Her mother Shyamala Gopalan inherits from her parents a keen sense of historical inequities and the reasons behind them and a desire to orchestrate change. It is this same legacy that she, in turn, passes on to her children:

[M]y mother learned that it was service to others that gave life purpose and meaning. And from my mother...I learned the same. (17)

Rooted in a family tradition of service, for Harris, life becomes meaningful only in a relational frame where one is accountable to others, including those from the immediate family and the larger community.

Harris writes with great care and affection about her mother's dedication towards service. Doing something meaningful for others is the trigger behind her Indian-origin mother's involvement in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Harris recalls how Civil Rights protest and heated discussions about Black rights and freedom were entrenched into

her childhood. She recalls how her parents “brought [her] in a stroller with them to civil rights marches. [She has] young memories of a sea of legs moving about, of the energy and shouts and chants” (17). The most interesting part of this episode is a bit climatic and humorous:

My mother would laugh telling a story she loved about the time when I was fussing as a toddler. “What do you want?” she asked, trying to soothe me.

“Fweedom!” I yelled back. (17-18)

Framing it as the narrative of a toddler’s participation in the Civil Rights movement, Harris retrospectively records the ‘inheritance’ of ‘freedom’. The child’s innocent, mechanical picking up and blabbering out of a word she heard the most around her goes on to actually become the thing she would crave for: a free society with equal justice for all.

It is important to note that the text repeatedly refers back to ‘these’ talks, deliberations and rallies during the formative years. As she writes back as a public figure, she has the power and privilege to select the events that teach her the value of friendship and sense of belonging to a particular community/community. Deep bonding, Harris learns as a child, and recalls as an author, could ensue between people who have no other ties apart from a shared worldview. Talking about how the Civil Rights protests were also occasions and platforms where some of her mother’s most lasting connections were formed, she writes:

My mother surrounded herself with close friends who were really more like sisters...“Aunt Mary,” was one of them. They met through the civil rights movement that was taking shape in the early 1960s...As black students spoke out against injustice, a group of passionate, keenly intelligent, politically engaged young men and women found one another— my mother and Aunt Mary among them. (18)

She recalls how protests against common deprivations and acts of injustice helped create a community. Like-minded people came together whose sense of friendship and solidarity surpassed politics to form meaningful bonds that transcended personal relations. As Harris writes, it is in her mother’s acquaintance with the black community that she finds a family in an otherwise foreign country: “In a country where she had no family, they were her family—and she was theirs” (ibid). To show the power of bonding, she refers to her

mother's long-distance relationship with her family back in India. She insists that physical presence or meetings were inconsequential when it came to maintaining relationships: "our sense of family—of closeness and comfort and trust—was able to penetrate the distance... We were always there for one another, regardless of what form that would take" (19).

The text records how friendships and long-distance relationships become the bases of the author's understanding of community: a broad, widely dispersed group of heterogeneous peoples can still form a unified community in the presence of a unity of purpose and a shared vision for the future. It is necessary to add here that it is her narrative reconfiguration that allows her to reiterate the value of community. Recalling her own life and training as a public figure allows her to put together a story of an aspirational community that builds itself up through fights but teaches the value of love and sacrifice and collective trust. Harris chooses her heroes carefully in order to show the power of compassion and community. Her mother's acquaintances in America—whether be it Aunt Mary or Ms. Regina Shelton—reinforce an ethics based on pure community participation whereby filial ties or affiliations are secondary to a shared sense of belonging to the community. Harris writes about how the Shelton's nursery school and after-school program at home became a respite for many working women like her own mother who could leave their children under the care of the Sheltons. Even in her meagre capacity, Ms. Shelton with her constant appreciation and motivation, managed to touch the lives of the Black children left in her care. And yet, as Harris recounts, she never once gave the impression that she was doing something remarkable: "To her, these deeds were not extraordinary, they were simply an extension of her values" (21). Adopting a girl named Sandy and taking in many more as her "foster children," Ms. Shelton was, in Harris' eyes, an epitome of the sense of service to one's community, always working selflessly without seeking any credit.

Harris recalls the power of religion in the community, when she is given her lessons in the Bible and taught regarding God's command to speak up for the voiceless and help the needy. She instantly relates to the fact that "faith" is more a verb than a "noun," "I believe we must live our faith and show faith in action" (23). This trust in the power of faith and the will to transform that faith into action is seen as a social tool.

In Harris' book, the importance of individuals who assist her or advocate change is closely linked to institutions that enable such acts and thoughts. A major influence during her formative years that injects the spirit of community bonding in her was the "Black cultural center: Rainbow Sign" (ibid). The role of Rainbow Sign, presented as the epicentre of all progressive thoughts and ideas of the community, is significant in the narrative recollection of Harris' formative years. Harris recalls:

Rainbow Sign was a performance space, cinema, art gallery, dance studio, and more. It had a restaurant...[Y]ou could take classes in dance and foreign languages, or workshops in theater and art...[T]here were screenings, lectures, and performances from some of the most prominent black thinkers and leaders of the day...men and women at the vanguard of American culture and critical thought. (24)

The inclusive nature of the place and the exposure to the most current thoughts and debates served to broaden the outlook of the people who visited it. Aimed with the motto, "For the love of people," (ibid) it kept its doors open to all sections of the public, especially children for whom the center designed special programs in order that they have face to face interactions with invited speakers from different fields. In as much as it was a place serving multiple purposes and catering to a variety of intellectual and cultural demands, its role as a catalyst becomes increasingly evident in the process of narration. Retrospective ordering of events in this case lends the centre an added aura, that of a community enabler for the Black people.

Such exposure and access to Black people, who dared to transcend the barriers of race and thus become models of leadership and success worth emulating, infused Harris and the other children with the confidence that they too 'could' succeed. The author reflects on how the center's programs served to buttress and reinscribe the "daily lessons" (25) imparted by her mother at home. 'Rainbow Sign' became, for Harris, the place where she could see her mother's teachings being verified by actual, real-life examples:

My mother...would tell us, "Fight systems in a way that causes them to be fairer, and don't be limited by what has always been." At Rainbow Sign, I'd see those values in action, those principles personified. It was a citizen's upbringing, the only kind I knew, and one I assumed everyone else was experiencing, too. (ibid)

It is important to note how she shapes her upbringing in retrospect. She reorders her life in such a way that it privileges a collective production of a future—not of the dark past or the bitter present—that is the United States of America. One has to invest in memories that produce a world that is bound to be very different from “what has always been.” Harris’ narrative of her mother as well as the community she grew up in produces a discourse of trust where people and institutions seek and share the knowledge of the rights that a citizen is entitled to. As American citizens, it was expected that they would fight for their fair share of rights and privileges undaunted by any history to the contrary.

Harris sees her choice of law for a career in this light. She can claim, looking back, that it is this intention to help create a ‘fairer’ society that serves as the guiding principle, “I cared a lot about fairness, and I saw the law as a tool that can help make things fair” (27). She can also identify, in retrospect, a similar motive that informs the decision to start her career as a prosecutor in the district attorney’s office. As someone who had been exposed to activist protests regarding civil rights and justice right from infancy, Harris could see that change can ensue only when outside protests are bolstered by empathic ears from within the system. While remaining on the battleground to highlight and carry forward voices of protests against an unfair social order was necessary—perhaps even fundamental to change—it was equally important to enter that structure so as to be a part of the decision-making process. To quote Harris:

I...knew that what was wrong with the system didn’t need to be an immutable fact. And I wanted to be part of changing that...I also knew there was an important role on the inside, sitting at the table where the decisions were being made. When activists came marching...I wanted to be on the other side to let them in. (30)

Exercising agency in service of the larger society remains the primary guiding force. Reality could be altered, the future transformed for the better—provided there were people willing and striving to bring about that change. As Harris keeps on insisting, even in her early career days as a prosecutor, she was always “conscious of the immense responsibility [she] held—the duty to protect those who were among the most vulnerable and voiceless” (31-32). One of the most fundamental tenets of the American judiciary—the idea that while representing a person, prosecutors actually stand up for the entire society—remained, according to the author, the core value throughout all the cases she handled. As prosecutor, she was supposed to stand/speak up “for the people” and that motto had always



been her “compass” (32). In retrospect, the idea of justice is not just a case of appropriate judgement but a key social instrument of enabling.

Harris’ subsequent decision to run for elected office is yet again propelled by a desire to effect positive change by being engaged in the very process of policy-making. While serving in the San Francisco City Attorney’s office after being offered a job there, she got a chance to work on the level of policy. As Harris’ experiences in the American legal system taught her, many of the crimes recorded could be attributed to wrong policies that did not heed to the needs of those marginalised or underprivileged. Her success in the City Attorney’s Office in “co-founding a task force” (36) dedicated to addressing the concerns of young victims of sexual exploitation made her realise the service she could offer in terms of “policy work without being a legislator” (38). The linking of professional values to social enabling in the text is a key to her life as a politician. The realisation that she could use her agency not just to help attain justice in the aftermath of a crime but to look into the very causes that allowed such crimes to take place ultimately justifies her decision to run for office.

As Harris asserts, her experiences in life and the knowledge she had been able to gather from different people and places taught her to be weary of any myopic understanding of treating crimes and criminals. Any frame that contextualises approaches to dealing with crimes in uncomplicated terms of being “either tough on crime or soft on crime” (30) risks overlooking the complex and often interlacing factors behind crimes. What was needed, then, was a different approach that could be parallelly both—rigid in administering lawful punishments yet also understanding of what drives certain people, often unwillingly and without choice, to crimes. As a lawyer and legislator, she was required to recontextualize any crime or criminal offence that came to her notice.

After being elected as the District Attorney, Harris directs her attention to this task of developing a model which would allow empathy to be a guiding force in the criminal justice system—a system otherwise seen as operating devoid of any emotions. Moreover, as she writes in the autobiography, her unique position as a Black woman along with the experiences that she had garnered as a prosecutor endowed her with a very different perspective from many other district attorneys. She positions herself as exceptional, especially as a Black woman district attorney. Harris recalls:

At the time, there weren't many district attorneys who looked like me or had my background. There still aren't. A report in 2015 found that 95 percent of our country's elected prosecutors were white and 79 percent were white men. (45)

On the one hand, recalling 'produces' an ideology that was not apparent at the moment. That office bearers are mostly from privileged backgrounds make the understanding of crimes as fallouts of the administration's or society's apathy difficult. Harris' own position as a Black woman, she realises via the process of writing her autobiography, better equips her to understand such linkages. Again, it is important to recall the consolidation of a perspective that emerges in the process of writing:

The courthouse was supposed to be the epicenter of justice, but it was often a great epicentre of injustice. (ibid)

Clearly, it is this affective dimension—an empathic understanding of the implications of socio-economic disparity and injustice on the rate and numbers of crimes committed—that she sought to bring to the understanding of crime. As a writer of her life, she 'emplots' the growth of this perspective. In other words, life writing gives to the event a new dimension that emerges in retrospect.

Harris uses her office as the district attorney of San Francisco or later as the Attorney General of California to build sustained, more personal relations with "both the victims of crimes committed and the victims of a broken criminal justice system" (46). She, moreover, is also witness to the kind of resilience and positive endeavour that victims at times are capable of displaying. She recalls—it is important to recognise this aspect—her encounter with a mother whose child had been killed in street violence. Harris recalls how instead of indulging in the expression of grief, the woman manages to rise above her sorrow and work towards creating greater awareness on street violence. Along with other grieving mothers, she joins the Mothers of Homicide Victims—a mutual support group working together to overcome the sorrow of having lost their children and channelling their grief to organize for justice. Harris recalls her instant recognition and sense of connection to the woman's deeply personal sorrow and her fortitude in the face of that shattering grief:

I knew exactly why she was there. She was the mother of a murdered child...She was grieving and exhausted. And yet her being there at all was a testament to her strength. (47)

In being able to “literally see” (ibid) and understand the plight of the woman who had lost her child, the autobiographer is able to connect with her and the other women of the Mothers of Homicide Victims group in much more empathic terms than the impersonal office of district attorney allowed her. Looking back, this and other such moments allow her to forge a philosophy of life that is linked to social welfare. However, linking social welfare to friendship, community bonding and transforming personal problems or grief into enabling tools is as much a perspective as a fact of life. In autobiographical writing, linking the two is related to the question of reordering life’s choices.

Dividing her goals into “short-, medium-, and long-term” (55), Harris tries to do her part in contributing to the creation of a more just society. In all her dealings with the various problems affecting the country—racial bias, heavy bail bonds prices, drug addiction, police brutality, foreclosures—she adopts a humane view which looks into the very roots of the problems so as to be able to curb them. Regarding the problem of foreclosures with which Harris had been significantly involved throughout her career, for instance, she writes:

Foreclosure is not a statistic. Foreclosure is a husband suffering in silence, knowing he’s in trouble but too ashamed to tell his partner that he has failed. Foreclosure is a mother on the phone with her bank...It is the changing of locks, the immolation of dreams. It is a child learning for the first time that parents can be terrified too. (67)

It is such understanding of the human situation that drives her to humanise the justice system as a whole: to bring in an ethics rooted in love and empathy and by so doing, have a better view of the ramifications of individual tragedies on entire families.

In her different capacities as district attorney, attorney general and then as a US senator with which she ends her autobiography, Harris, in a manner similar to Obama and Rice, operates with the fundamental belief that current social reality, although not too optimistic, can be worked on and a better future envisioned. In her politics she works with the assumption that once/if disillusionment is rejected in favour of forging meaningful

networks, especially ones that transcend filial markers of identity, a just, egalitarian society foregrounded on love, mutual trust, and empathy cannot be far behind. In her autobiography, she reconnects the belief to an “affective community.”

As she recalls her experience as a member of the United States Senate Intelligence Committee, she discusses the challenges to national security, challenges of cybersecurity and climate change, while investing in hope and deep belief in the narrative of America’s unity as a nation and as a world leader. Even as disturbing information regarding Russia’s role in the manipulation of sensitive election data during the 2016 US Presidential Elections keep coming in and make the threat of cyberwar very real, she strings up an optimistic adherence to faith in the system and people’s goodness and commitment to fair play:

We must remember what we have worked and in some cases bled for...Imperfect though we have been, ours is a history in pursuit of a better, safer, freer world. In the years to come, with all the challenges to come, we cannot lose sight of who we are and who we can be. (189)

Her autobiography supplements her politics. Her insistence on the ‘can’—on the scopes that the future holds and offers—is at once a reiteration of her vision and an invention of a growth narrative of justice. Harris ends her autobiography by penning down a series of slogan-like messages for anyone who would like to benefit from her experiences just as she had been encouraged and inspired by the wisdom of other people—her mother, her extended family, the community she grew up in, Howard University, and the many other acquaintances and friendships she had built over the course of her career.

In all three of the autobiographies under scrutiny, we find mentions of the ‘American Dream’ and how it could be coupled with a Black narrative of progress. The rise of the authors into important ‘public’ positions integrates the success stories of marginalized people including Blacks. The autobiographies show how the American Dream can effectively translate metanarratives of individual success into narratives that vouch for the collective will of communities, inclusive stories of individual growth and progress, alongside the American nation.

In conclusion, the current chapter has tried to see how contemporary Black American women, who have managed to rise to top public positions integrate real life

experiences into a forward looking narrative even as they continue to look back to their origins and recognize the reality of racism and sexism. The authors examined in the chapter have all been part of the US administrative machinery—the maker and breaker of the American ideal—and as women with the capacity to bring in change and influence, they have invested in a politics of hope. Although as Black women, they know and accept that their journeys have not been easy and that they form a minority, they consciously reject hatred or identity politics to embody a new mode of resistance—one that seeks to overcome inequities by building ‘affective’ networks and communities. By emphasising “affect” or ‘love’ as the framework through which to engage in this new politics, they picture a global society where differences are transcended in the process of forming heterogeneous communities.

Reordering life in their autobiographies—memories, experiences, interpretations and influence of events—allows these women to integrate politics to possibilities and not allow the past to irreversibly dominate their action, character and thought. If they saw the power of hatred, they also saw how it was important not to play on hatred but build on hope and trust to take lives and the nation forward. These are neither stories of shallow optimism nor of escape and ambiguity. What informs these life writing texts is a sense of reparation that is possible only in a country that sees itself as a vast network of affective communities.