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BOOK REVIEW

Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance

Barack Obama

Crown Publishers New York, 1995, 2004. 442pp. ISBN 978 1 84767 094 6

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The book under review, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* divided in nineteen chapters, has been written by the then Senator from Illinois, Lincoln's home State (The current US President) Barack Obama. It was first published in 1995, shortly after Barack became the first black editor of the prestigious Harvard Law Review (& reissued in 2004) when he was graduated from Harvard Law School at the age of 33. As the name of the book suggests that the absent father looms in the imaginations of the writer. It is Barack Obama Senior or rather his absence that provides the story line strength behind this memoir. The book serves as a sore reminder of mental and poignant plague that is inflicted on children when their fathers are distant or completely missing in action. He explores beautifully his relationship with his ever-present yet non-existent father and this is the main idea of the book. It is a saga of self discovery, a tale of a son, seeking his father as ancient one. *Dreams from My Father* is a journey through dilemmas and belongings about racial identity, social responsibility and search for the meaning of the family. In his memoir, the author relates an emotional odyssey, as it explores the dilemmas of black people facing in America and the extent of African-American wrath in the face of white incomprehension.

The memoir is a story of the child, named Barack divided between Hawaii and Jakarta, of a black African father from Kenya (Luo Tribe) and white mother from Midwest (Kansas). The writer describes an inside view of how it feels to grow up black in the American society. It was a feeling of an alien because of having a multi-national and multi-racial genesis and background. The experiences of the writer reveal the post modern secular society that the United States has become in the 21st century. It offers an interesting outlook of race relations in the United States in 60's and 70's while at the same time signifying the other negative side effects of European colonialism during the 19th and 20th centuries.

The book begins in 1960, when Barack is a young boy living in Hawaii. He tells of his sufferings while growing up and the lessons he learnt out of them. He lives with his white mother and grand parents; after his Kenyan father had returned to Kenya to work. Barack was only two years when his father left his mother. He never met his father until the age of ten. He only remembers his father's exceptional personality and confidence. At one point, the author regrets that 'his father had not been able to tell him his true feelings when they met, any more than Barry had been able to express his ten years old desires'. After many years; he heard that his father had died in a car accident. "Only a vague sense of opportunity lost", says the writer. This death brings about a change in Barack's life to a small town in Kansas. It is the place from where he traces the migration of his mother's family to Hawaii. Later on in the memoir, his mother marries an Indonesian man. Barack moves to Indonesia along with his mother and step father to start a new life. A new culture brings a lot of problems for the writer as a child. The culture, he says, 'Quickly makes a child into a man'. Here it is interesting to note that when most of the children in Indonesia were shell shocked from a move in their country, Barack watched and learnt, observed and discovered. After a while her mother started realizing that this new environment was making her son scared to share his feeling. Thus she decided to send him back to Hawaii, only to make him know what it is like to grow up as an American. It was his mother who helped in shaping his ethnic identity as a black man and inculcated his pride in being black. Due to the love of his mother and grand parents, he was able to deal with indignities that he and other blacks were to face in the society without being annoyed at all white people. The greatest example is that his white mother and grand parents never uttered the cutting remarks of his absent father in front of him. His mother raised Barack to admire and see the greatness in the character of the man who had deserted her and was polygamy. It dawns upon the readers that it was the influences of distressed cultures and the initiation of the truth that he was the black in a white society, led him to the formation of this man.

As in Hawaii, there was more racial mixing than any where else in the US, Barack as a youngster learned through many occasions that he was a black person in essentially a White man's world. He was one of the only two black people in the class. His confusion and resentment at school can be sensed in his memoir where he was known as Barry. It is painful that the other kids used to run their hands through his tight curls give him high fives and treated him like a cool street rapper.

He argues with himself almost on every page. The recognition of his own ultimately privileged position and understanding for others is evident on each page. He believes in the power of words. 'If I could find the right words, things would change', he says and this was proved in the later years (2004) when he was chosen a key note speaker in a democratic convention. He tries to convince how philanthropy and selflessness are the most practical solutions to the individual, national and international miseries. The memoir also tells about his life as a

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student, where he used to live in a flat, eating soup from a can and even sleeping rough in New York.

He also writes on an attitude that he learnt on the subject of 'Respect'. He says, "And something else, too, something no body talked about a way of being together when the game was tight and the sweat broke and the best players stopped worrying about their points and the worst players got swept up in the moment and the score only mattered because that's how you sustained the trance. In the middle of which you might make a move or a pass that surprised even you, so that even the guy guarding you had to smile, as if to say, 'Damn'..."

His life journey takes him to Columbia University but still he finds himself at a loose end. Then a new turn comes up in his life that changes everything and changes nothing, the call from her aunt from Kenya, "Barry, your father is dead". It was his intense desire to know about place of blacks in America that drives him to Chicago.

The Second third of the book is about his life as a community organizer in Chicago which really deals with the complex problems. These days are well covered in this book. He gives up successful job in New York to work on the streets. It is his first break through as he seems desired to help others, especially poor blacks who had been fighting for fair housing and educational opportunities. His tireless efforts are observed to motivate and encourage the communities. He comes to know from first hand experience show hard it is to make progress while struggle against the dead weight of poverty. He knows how many black young people have fallen a victim to despondency in the blind alley. It is infact his platform from which he rests on to do enormous things. These efforts shape his character all along the way. He faces numerous barriers on his way to gain influence. This part of life gives him a chance to solidify his political views also. Still he finds himself incomplete. He writes, "My identity might begin with the fact of my race but it didn't". He finds many people around him with same ideas as him, the only difference was that unlike Barack, they knew about their black heritage because they were grown up in the face of hardships and trials. During this time, he gets a chance to meet her Kenyan sister Auma, who tells her some unknown details about his father, 'quality to make every body to think that he had every thing, even when he had nothing.' After several years, he decided to go back to Law School.

The apex of Barack's life was finally visiting his African family in Kenya. This reflection stayed with him through out, as he had lived under the shadow of a man whom he was named but did not know, a man that meant him bigger than life. Here he came to know in a real sense who Barack Obama was? When he finally met his Kenyan siblings, they embraced him as Obama. "My name belonged and so I belonged, drawn into a web of relationships, alliances and grudges that I did not yet understand", he writes. Although his father had died yet Obama learnt the legacy, pain, optimism, thoughts and demos of this man. "Where once I'd felt the need to live up to his expectations, I now felt as if had to make up for all his

mistakes”, so says Barack Obama of his father which is to a larger extent is the central part of this intriguing memoir. He explores the meaning of heritage in his own life. It is during this visit where he receives his inheritance, not the wealth of property but the wealth of information about generations past. It is the discovery of his father’s past and connectivity with his Kenyan siblings. Growing up Barack had a little influence of his father and only dreamed about him. Even in the school, he spun years about his father’s life in Kenya (Africa), “My grandfather, see, he’s a chief. It is a sort of like the king of the tribe....So that makes my father a prince. He will take over when my grand father dies.” Behind his fairy-tale, the writer dreams of the real life behind his father’s mysteries. He goes to find out how he relates to his unknown father’s identity. The writer has been facing a number of external changes that shifted his identity. He remains in a constant journey, searching for something that offers meaning to him. He finds that Polygamy, debt, aggression, violence, political uprisings betrayals and infidelity are all part of his heritage. Here he learns that his father was not the man he thought. The potential his father had was never realized.

Sitting on his father’s grave, the writer understands what his father might have taught him, if only silence, caused by fear through out generations, would not have been a hindrance. He portrays the true facts, “I realized that who I was, what I cared about, was no longer just a matter of intellect or obligation, no longer a construct of words. I saw that my life in America-the black life, the white life, the sense of abandonment I’d felt as a boy, the frustration and hope I witnessed in Chicago, all of it was connected with this or the color of my skin. The pain I felt was my father’s pain. My questions were my brother’s questions. Their struggles, my birth right”. The writer returns to America to grapple with the issue of his brown skin and how some Americans react to that. Barack also tells about his ideal years as teen age, his past fondness for pots and liquor but soon these obsessions lose color away when he finds reason to his life.

The book tries to bring a ray of optimism for the desperate communities in sink estates around the decaying shells of Chicago’s industrial parts. The search of the young boy for truth and story of his missing father answers to his divided racial inheritance leads him to write such a powerful biography. The door seems to open for those who want to apply themselves through learning and education. Overall this book. It is a beautifully written memoir of a young man who struggles to come to term with his heritage as a child of bi-racial parents. His thoughts on black culture and struggle to define blackness certainly demands appreciation. The memoir really makes feel the readers by the fact that this young writer has indeed graduated from the University of life as well as Harvard Law School. The people in the book have been treated with kindness and understanding and every experience is framed in such a perceptive way that never loses its sympathy for the people involved. The book depicts the generosity of perception that is rarely seen in the young people in today’s world. Like every reading, the book certainly carries a few drawbacks. At times, there have been unnecessary details given like

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his life in Chicago as community organizer; still it is a spell bound reading. Another thing that his mother appears very shortly in the memoir, despite having a powerful influence on his personality. May be, he did not need to write about her as his relationship with her was unambiguous. His mother and grand parents are between the lines on every page of this memoir. Their love, support and values were indeed the basis of his life.

Although the book shows the resentment of the writer yet he has not spoken ill towards other people. He leaves the readers with open ended questions: how are we different, how are we similar, what does that mean? Still the bottom line is that it is a must read book.