**2009**

**14-16 Years**

**3rd Place**

**Sonia Nyathi**

**Reflect on how you and your family reacted to Barack Obama winning the US election. Does it matter that the next President of the USA is a man of African descent? Will it make a difference? How would you now respond to the following statement: “Africans are not supposed to think or argue; they just dance.**

“We've got a tragic history when it comes to race in this country. We've got a lot of pent-up anger and bitterness and misunderstanding. ... This country wants to move beyond these kinds of things“. Barack Obama

What were you doing when Nelson Mandela was freed from prison? This is a question that my mother’s generation would have asked each other. What were you doing when you heard that Neil Armstrong had landed on the moon? This question is one that my grandmother’s generation would be more likely to ask. My friends and I at school were all quizzing each other on whether we had seen the inauguration of Barack Obama as the president of the United States of America. This is our generation question- what were you doing when Obama was inaugurated as the 44th President of the United States of America?!

I remember sitting down with my family around 4:00 PM on the 20th of January and watching CNN that was covering the Obama inauguration.  The joy and pride that shone on each member of the family was evident. Even my 5 year old brother who has no understanding of politics was jubilant from the sheer joy of seeing his whole family celebrating something he could not comprehend. Indeed, as they say, joy is infectious; our house was filled with a viral infection of pure joy on that day of the 44th American president. I’m sure if I would have asked him why it was so interesting to him, he would have given me a response that would have gone something like this; “my whole family seems to be excited about this, so I think that it should be exciting as well.” What I’m trying to portray is that my little 5 year old brother would not give me a political reason for being an Obama supporter but more of what mattered to him, his relations. My mother or father, on the other hand, would have given me a more complex well thought out reason that would have touched a number of issues like, racism, ideological change and political systems of the world.

 one may ask, what is different about this particular man that has made the whole world celebrate? Does skin colour have something to do with it? Or is it because he is man full of vision and charismatic energy?  My answer is yes to both of these questions. In this paper, I will also argue that Obama’s relevance to the political world is derived both from his African descent, his upbringing, and indeed his personal attributes as a man of vision and charismatic nature.

Many black people throughout our history have tried to fight for liberty, and fought against segregation. Many black people have sacrificed their lives in order for us to be treated equally. For example  Martin Luther King gave many speeches and led many marches to help end segregation.  His fight for equal rights peacefully inspired many including Barack Obama. He had mentioned in his extraordinary speech ‘I have a dream’ that he had wanted a black president in America. I guess his indispensable dream came true in the end., Malcolm X thought you should fight for equal rights "by any means necessary," even with violence.  Malcolm x was so frantic for change that he was willing to go to severe measures in order to get what he wanted.  It is a magnificent thing to know that all this` fighting and debating and arguing has finally paid of. I recently heard a phrase that was said ” Rosa Parks sat so Martin could walk, Martin walked so Obama could run, and Obama ran so our children can fly!” in my interpretation it meant that the work of all these people inspires us to aim higher, so Barack Obama being president, in a way  inspires us to become whatever we like.  Barack Obama being black is a major reason why the world is celebrating his success.

In this paper, I would like to argue that indeed it is very important that Barack Obama is a man of African descent.  However, this importance does not necessarily translate to positive outcomes for the people of African descent. I will first list my reasons why I think it matters that Obama is of African descent and the possible positive outcomes that may come out of this. On the other hand, I will pose some problems that I think may generate from this outcome.

First of all, most of the African people I know were excited on the prospect of having a man of African descent having the most powerful position in the world. This is mainly due to the fact that world-wide, black people have been sidelined by the predominantly Caucasian community. In a sense this joy emanated from a people who see a coming change in the way people view Africans. Traditionally speaking, people of African descent have been viewed as really good at sports, dancing, singing and many other athletic activities. People of European descent however, have been seen as excelling in more academic activities. Some people have even gone so far as gathering research data to show that indeed this is the case. Obama in this case, serves as an example in destroying this stereotype of people of African descent. He had courage to run for president against the predominantly white people, He brings hope to many people of all races black and white that they  should aim as high as they want and their ambition can be achieved. He brings new hope for a fresh start to Americans, to the whole world, even. What disappoints me is that there are some people in this world stuck in the past who are irritated by the fact that we have a black American President. People who for some reason still believe blacks and whites are not equivalent. Barack Obama has to be overly protected for these threats to his life. We may have come a long way but there is still a lot of racism left in this world.

Secondly, the United States of America is viewed as the leader in most things in this life. I think that it is of very major importance that the leader of this nation is of African descent in a country that is predominantly Caucasian. Could it be that the rest of the world might see this as the way forward? Could it be that this might be an example for those countries to follow, to go beyond race and concentrate on individual assets of a person? Could this mean the next black prime minister in the UK?

Another reason why I think Obama’s election will be of importance to people of African descent rests on the man himself and not on his symbolic meaning. Obama is unique in the fact that he has been in touch with both the American culture and the African culture. He has grown up as an Afro-American. He has personally experienced what it means to be of African descent. He therefore, unlike all his other predecessors, has a personal and unique experience that will hopefully translate to more tangible policies on his part. Most people of African descent see this as a beam of hope for them. There is a man who truly understands us!

While it is of great importance that Obama has been elected as the first Afro-American president, how he does in office may be even more important. It is important to note whether he will be treated as the President of the United States of America or the African-American President of the United States. Will people tend to highlight his skin colour when they disagree with his policies, and downplay his colour when they agree with him? Since this is a futuristic question, only the future will give an answer to this question.

This kind of reasoning brings to light a very problematic outcome of the Obama election. It is my opinion that if he fails and becomes unpopular like George Bush, his skin colour will be more of a problem than ever.

Some people think the African descent of Barack Obama has been overhyped. Indeed these people go on to claim that the reason why Obama is so successful is mainly due to having been brought up by his  white grandmother who made it possible for him to go on to Harvard and other exclusive schools. While these people may be passionate about their claim, it seems they miss the point that wherever Obama went, he was treated as most people of African descent are; he could have gone to Harvard but he was an African-American man in Harvard. That is an important fact that makes him quite special.

In this paper, I have described how my family reacted to the inauguration of Obama, I have shown that although some reasons of the excitement of Obama’s inauguration were political and driven by historical ideology, some of the reasons were personal and family orientated. I have listed the reasons why I think this election was of important consequence to people of African descent, mainly that; Obama serves as a symbolic meaning that will hopefully override the prevailing stereotypes of people of African descent; Obama is unique as he has experienced life as an African-American; United States of America is a leader in various worldly things, it is very interesting that it’s President is of African descent and hopefully some other countries may feel obliged to go beyond race in their respective countries. I have also set up a warning on other ill effects of the Obama election. It is possible that Obama’s office term might be marred with racial issues. His skin colour might be blamed when things go wrong in the oval office. I have ended with a brief overview of why other people think that it does not matter that Obama is of African descent.