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The politics of victimhood

by Emina Melonic

What does it mean to be an American? What defines the American experience? How should immigrants participate in this experience, and to what extent should they assimilate or preserve their native cultures within the framework of American society? For about as long as there have been immigrants to our nation, critics, writers, and pundits alike have examined these questions. The Moroccan-American novelist Laila Lalami's new nonfiction book, *Conditional Citizens: On Belonging in America*, seeks to answer some of them. Unfortunately, her approach to these highly relevant issues is one-dimensional.

In a series of thematically connected essays (portions of which were previously published in *The Nation*, *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere), Lalami aims to illuminate the injustices that have plagued various groups of people in America, namely people of color, women, and immigrants. An immigrant and an American citizen herself, Lalami has several decades of experience on which to look back, from her time as a newly arrived student from Morocco in the 1990s, to her career as a writer and teacher today.

In Lalami's disappointingly cynical worldview, true equality and citizenship are only limited to a select few. Despite this, she admits that her life in America has been happy and fairly comfortable. After all, she has managed to become an accomplished novelist and a tenured professor of creative writing. In her mind, however, there are "certain facts" that still render her "a conditional citizen." "By this," she writes, "I mean that my relationship to the state, observed through exposure to its policies or encounters with its representatives, is affected in all sorts of ways by my being an immigrant, a woman, an Arab, and a Muslim."

This premise sets the course for Lalami's argument throughout a book that is entirely based on identity politics. She addresses various topics that have already been covered by the media *ad nauseam* such as borders, voting rights, and racism. Who is to blame for all of these problems? According to Lalami, white people are.

"Conditional citizenship," she writes, "is characterized by the burden of having to educate white Americans about all the ways in which one is different from them." Throughout the book, Lalami

gives examples of how the process of gaining citizenship is unfair and asks too much of immigrants by demanding a certain level of knowledge and their eventual assimilation into American culture. At some point, she complains about all the bureaucratic and “draconian” hoops through which she had to jump to secure permanent residency and then citizenship—which, in reality, are standard requirements for any immigrant. Filling out forms and passing a test on American history and government are hardly draconian.

Lalami’s essays are peppered with personal vignettes from her childhood. On several occasions, Lalami poignantly reflects on her interior struggles: “My whole life has been lived in-between—in between languages, in between cultures, in between countries.” Such reflections occasionally begin to take on a multi-dimensional form, but this abruptly stops as soon as Lalami switches to political talking points lifted straight from the mainstream media’s playbook on “white privilege.” Thus, the essays become repetitive and unimaginative. Commenting on the apparent futility and immorality of borders, Lalami writes,

A border could be natural—an ocean, a river, a chain of mountains—or it could be artificial, splitting a homogeneous landscape or a unified people into two, as happened, for example, during the colonial era in Asia, Africa, and here in America. Often a border was highly literal, announcing itself in the shape of a concrete wall, a sand berm, a tall fence topped with barbed wire. But I hadn’t considered that a border could also be expandable and movable, like the CBP checkpoints in the United States, which take the form of permanent as well as roving stations. I have since come to realize that, whatever form it takes, a border primarily conveys meaning about the Self and the Other.

Setting aside the naive notion that nations can even exist without borders, Lalami briefly mentions that the crux of the border issue lies with the unfair and cruel divide between the concepts of “the Self” and “the Other.” But once again, she does not elaborate on this potentially fruitful line of thought. This is, after all, a rather deep philosophical concept that has metaphysical implications.

First of all, in order to delineate these two concepts, one must acknowledge that a person’s life is composed of interior and exterior, public and private. Secondly, to recognize the existence of an interior life of another person (“the Other”), one must first and foremost acknowledge the inherent dignity of that individual. This division between Self and Other is not some kind of manifestation of human cruelty but rather a fundamental prerequisite for the function of all human interaction and love itself. Healthy interpersonal relations are defined by a respectful give and take between public and private, exclusion and inclusion, operating on a principle of trust and negotiated vulnerability. This is why governments should not seek to legislate and force when and how this individual interaction takes place on a national level. Accordingly, a sovereign nation has the right to protect itself and to make appropriate choices as to who will be welcomed into the nation. In other words, it is not in any way an immigrant’s right to be admitted into a sovereign nation such as the United States, but rather a privilege bestowed by the inviting country once a modicum of trust has been established through the application process.

Of course, such questions will continue to be part of the political and philosophical debate in our country for years to come. But Lalami’s failure to elaborate on these issues as well as her rejection

of the political reality of sovereignty are disappointing; she contributes nothing to these much needed conversations. The essays lack nuance, not only about our present political situation but also about the human condition in general.

While Lalami brings up some valid points about how some Americans objectify and dehumanize immigrants, she ultimately fails once again to explore this subject with the distinction it deserves. Instead, she blames it on white Americans, and actually ends up enacting a similar process of dehumanization as the one she criticizes. The best example of this occurs when Lalami brings up her experience at a reading for one of her novels, during which a “white woman in a blue pantsuit” asked her to explain her upbringing in Morocco. The woman’s questions eventually “drifted from Morocco to Islam—and then to isis.” Lalami writes that she was offended and fatigued by this line of questioning. Why should she, a Moroccan-American, answer questions about isis, she wonders? Fair enough. But perhaps this “white woman” was just asking a foolish or ignorant question, as people often do.

I am an immigrant to America and a Bosnian Muslim. I have had my share of stupid questions from a variety of people, of many backgrounds and many colors. In such situations, the mature response is to either steer the conversation onto a more meaningful path or simply ignore the question outright. Lalami instead chooses to become offended and irritated. This is unfortunate, as Lalami’s “white woman” likely came to the reading *because* she had an open mind and wanted to learn more. This is the attitude that I myself have brought to reading her book; unfortunately, Lalami has little more patience for her readers than she does for her archetypical “white woman.”

Every immigrant who chooses to make America his or her home will experience some degree of distress on the journey toward citizenship, whether through sorrow, anger, or confusion and doubt about how one will fit in as a new citizen of this great and undoubtedly complex nation. But there are also joys, glimpses of happiness, and fond feelings for the people who lend a helping hand along the way—Americans and other immigrants alike.

At the heart of a virtuous life is the notion of gratitude. This is certainly true of the life of an immigrant. Sometimes, in the midst of deep suffering, it is difficult to be grateful. But it is a necessary step in order to find peace and contentment in this world. The fundamental weakness of *Conditional Citizens* is a lack of gratitude, despite the fact that Lalami mentions on many occasions that she lives a “happy life.” Instead, the book ends up as a list of cynical anecdotes and grievances about the elusive concept of “whiteness.” It is a missed opportunity to delve deeply into the actual meaning of what it means to be American today.

Emina Melonic’s work has been published in *National Review*, *The Imaginative Conservative*, *New English Review*, *Law and Liberty*, *American Greatness*, and *Splice Today*, among others.