

**Lalami, Laila. *Conditional Citizens: On Belonging in America*.**

New York: Penguin Random House, 2020, pp. 208.

Growing up as a kid in Kulachi- a solitary town in the North-West of Pakistan along the bank of river Gomal - my first (conscious) encounter with America came in the form of a wrestling match featuring Hulk Hogan and the Ultimate Warrior that I watched on a brand-new VCR brought by my father from Lahore on a hot afternoon in 1990. This was followed by Madonna's *La Isla Bonita*, Bee Gees' *Stayin Alive*, and Michael Jackson's hauntingly powerful, *Thriller*, that shaped some of the early images of America and its people in my young impressionable mind. By the time I had seen Rambo 3 and mastered playing Guile - a tough US Army Major in Street Fighter 2 video game - my infatuation with America was virtually inducing hallucinations. Indeed, it grew stronger throughout my teenage years until the fateful events of September 11, 2001 when it all came crashing down, mirroring the fall of the twin towers.

For others, like the Pulitzer Prize finalist and professor of creative writing at University of California, Laila Lalami, the disillusionment with "American Dream" was less abrupt. It took many blows of subtle discrimination and, at times, brazen bigotry to convince her that her proudly acquired American citizenship was conditioned by various accidents of birth - national origin, race, gender, and religion- which inspired her to narrate her own story in her new book, fittingly titled as *Conditional Citizens: On Belonging in America*. "After I became a citizen", writes Lalami, "I thought, somewhat naïvely I admit, that I would be treated no differently than other Americans. Since then, however, I have had ample opportunity to see all the ways in which this was not true". While she takes great pains in expounding the concept of a "conditional citizen" by digging up the old skeletons of American history marred by ugly xenophobic and racist episodes, Lalami succinctly sums

## Book Review

up conditional citizens as a group of “Americans who cannot enjoy the full rights, liberties, and protections of citizenship because of arbitrary markers of identity. Conditional citizens are people who know what it is like for a country to embrace you with one arm, and push you away with the other”.

In framing her main argument, Lalami employs a typically post-colonial, rather Saidian, discourse analysis to decry the maltreatment of non-white (and more specifically Muslim) American citizens based on their perceived “otherness” which undermines their “allegiance” to the United States and hampers their “assimilation” into mainstream American society – a society polarised by George W. Bush’s belligerent “either you’re with us or against us” post-9/11 rhetoric. She cites her own journey as a Moroccan immigrant becoming a U.S. citizen to explore where the actual boundaries of “Americanness” lie. In doing so, Lalami convincingly - even if somewhat lacking in originality - bemoans the pervasive influence of white supremacy in American legislation and culture that stands in the way of equal citizenship and constitutional rights for millions of African-American, Latinos, Asians and other non-European ethnic minorities. In public spaces, white presence is taken for granted and “treated as ordinary and invisible” as opposed to the presence of non-whites which is strictly monitored, harassed, and often reported as suspect. “How many camels did you have to trade in for her?” was the question posed by a smirking border agent at Los Angeles Airport to Lalami’s Husband- a painfully embarrassing experience that left her “speechless” and trembling with anger.

Even at the highest level of civic engagement and political participation - such as running for the presidential office - citizens with non-European/non-white background and ancestry are routinely subjected to racial and cultural filters to prove their Americanness and suitability for a public office. For instance, Lalami brings out a stark contrast between the experiences of Barack Obama and Donald Trump where the former was relentlessly pressed to produce his proof of citizenship and loyalty to the country and its Christian faith, while the latter was allowed to bash America (and other fellow

citizens) as “foolish,” “dumb,” and “very, very stupid” without creating much fuss or jeopardizing his presidential campaign. She contends how in discussing issues related to race, media organizations - and indeed the wider American society-projects a seething bias towards people of colour by “shrouding” whiteness in silence so that to “speak openly about it is to break a taboo”. Lalami, however, is mindful to avoid falling in the trap of committing an ecological fallacy by asserting categorically that “white privilege doesn’t mean that [all] white people have easy lives—it simply means that whiteness does not make their lives harder”. She backs her claim by citing relevant evidence on how racism negatively impacts the outcome of individual efforts in employment, housing, and education.

Despite the force and conviction of Lalami’s story, the book falls short on two important counts. First, while highlighting the historical discriminations against the Irish, German, and Southern Europeans in America, it offers little explanation for their eventual “assimilation” into American mainstream beyond their “whiteness”. Besides, as Lalami mentions it herself, some of them, such as Greeks and Italians, were perceived to be “insufficiently white”, which makes it even more pertinent to search for an alternative explanation for their successful integration into American society. Secondly, although it’s admittedly difficult to foresee how the socio-economic dynamics of a country would play out in an unusually volatile and politically charged climate at both national and global level, Lalami stops short of making any proclamations on whether the social divisions pointed out in the book will subside or spread further apart in the years to come. This diminishes the theoretical and predictive value of her first non-fiction work.

In the end, the strife and struggles endured by Lalami as an immigrant, Arab, and a Muslim woman negotiating and navigating through the debilitating hurdles of American society such as race, class, gender and religion, represents the plight of

## Book Review

millions of other “conditional citizens” who are denied their right to a life of hope and dignity at par with their fellow white, heterosexual, and male American citizens. “What I want is freedom, not better conditions of subjugation” demands Lalami. In concluding her story, Lalami draws inspiration from Thomas Jefferson – a man she simultaneously condemns for his compromising proclivity for slavery and admires for his enlightened ideals of human emancipation – by emphasizing the equality of all in the eyes of law as the only way forward. Despite the numerous ills afflicting America, Lalami tells her reader not to “despair of this country”.

*Asadullah Khan*