

Immigration Citizenship and Belonging in Lalami's America

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The United States of America is a country that is populated with immigrants, and the only people native to this land are the Native American Tribes. Even after coming to America in 1607 and populating the first permanent colony named Jamestown in Virginia, the first Anglo-Saxons were immigrants despite them claiming otherwise. So, it is extremely astonishing to observe their behaviour towards other immigrants who have worked hard to earn the right to be called US citizens. There are millions of incidents when other races have been told by the white citizens of America to go back to their country when these people are standing in their country. This behaviour goes centuries back when other races began to enter the United States. Laila Lalami, the author of "Conditional Citizens: On Belonging in America", wrote of such a treatment faced by American Muslims after the tragic event of 9/11. This essay will explore Lalami's experience along with some historical incidents in detail.

Post-War Immigration

During the 1920s, Asians were banned in America by Congress according to the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924. This barred the Asians from entering the USA completely. This was due to the Great Depression, as the lack of economic stability led the citizens to have a lowered tolerance for immigrants. In their eyes, the immigrants were stealing their jobs, which were their rights as US citizens. This tension between the immigrants and the US residents increased during World War II. It was also during this time that Japanese-Americans were isolated after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Thousands of Japanese were sent to internment camps under the guise of keeping them apart from those Japanese who meant to harm the country. However, all of the citizens of Japanese descent were held under suspicion of illicit activity. This act of incarceration is considered the most atrocious act and a violation of American Civil rights. This act was authorized by President Roosevelt, and it was known as Executive Order 9066. This order was to prevent espionage on the shores of the United States. In states like California, Washington and Oregon, where a large number of Japanese Americans resided, military zones were established. This was extremely unfortunate as out of 120,000 Japanese who were forcibly incarcerated, most were legal American citizens.

Before the official order, the navy had already removed Japanese Americans from the island near Los Angeles. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the FBI rounded up Japanese religious leaders and members of the Japanese American community and arrested them without any evidence. 1One thousand two hundred ninety-one people were arrested, and their assets were frozen. Private residences were searched, and items that seemed suspicious were seized without a warrant. The

newspaper published anti-Japanese propaganda, and some even tried to rope in Black American citizens based on both communities dwelling close by. Many Japanese Americans willingly moved to internment camps to prove their loyalty to the United States. They worked at these camps providing their services, and over 1,000 were sent to work on farms. In 1946, the last internment camp closed, and the Executive Order 9066 was officially repealed by President Gerald Ford in 1976. Then, almost a decade later, in 1988, a formal apology was issued by Congress, and 20,000 dollars were awarded to over 80,000 Japanese Americans as reparation for their ill-treatment (Ng, 2002).

The Great Migration

Africans entered America during the 1500s through the slave trade, and at this point in history, they were not immigrants but forcibly taken from their country and taken to America, which was at that time known as the “New World”. In human history, this was the largest forced migration of over fifty ethnic and linguistic groups. It took over 360 years to end the slave trade, which was in the 1860s. However, this was not the Great Migration; it came in 1916 and ended in 1970. During this migration, more than six million African Americans relocated from the South to the North, Midwest, and West. They were driven out of their homes due to a lack of economic stability, unfair segregation laws and a brutal environment. Many of these migrants went towards the North to take advantage of the industrial work available. It was during this time they also started to fight for equal rights for economic, social, and financial stability.

The reason for this migration was racial inequality faced by the African Americans by the White people of the South. They were forced to earn according to the “Black Code”, which kept them from achieving economic stability. They faced intimidation and acts of violence from the white people who went as far as openly murdering the African Americans. In 1914, when World War I broke, black people saw an opportunity and started to move north for the jobs available. These jobs were dangerous, but the African Americans worked hard to avoid going back to the South. This created another problem, which was fewer jobs in contrast to the number of migrants. Housing space was also limited, so instead of returning to the south, they built cities and jobs. This was a big blow to the South as most of their farmworkers had left, and more were leaving. By the end of The Great Migration, only twenty per cent of African Americans were left in the South (Trotter, 1991).

Lalami’s America

In early 2000, Lalami became a citizen of the United States; she was overjoyed, but this happiness came to an end on September 11th of the same year. The tragedy of 9/11 left the United States in devastation, but when the dust settled, all the fingers pointed towards the Muslim Americans, treating them as terrorists. It was true that the heinous crime was committed by the terrorist group AL-Qaeda, identified as Muslims, but that by no means meant that all Muslims were terrorists. This, however, was not the case as people started to treat all the Muslim Americans as terrorists and even to this,

they are treated as such. It is not easy for them to get a visa to America easily, so citizenship is even more difficult. Security checks are even harsher for Muslims than they are for any other religious group. There is so much fear regarding terrorism that now the name Muslim is synonymous with terrorism. It is an unfortunate truth, and it can be observed whenever people reveal themselves as Muslims, other people's behaviour changes instantly. They start to withdraw and get extremely uncomfortable, so much so that many Muslims hide their faith. This treatment has made many question their faith. They are shamed for their beliefs and told to leave the country as this is not a place for terrorists. Just because of one terrorist group, all the innocent are still paying the price (Lalami, 2020).

Conclusion:

Lalami's account is one of many in the long history of discrimination against different races in the United States. However, it is a hard truth that this is not the last incident. As long as one race deems itself superior to others, this discrimination will continue. It is time to stop thinking that one is better than the other because as long as we do it, we will remain divided. But it is high time that we unite, as hatred will only harm us, and history is proof of that.

References

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