

Book Review: *Meaningless Citizenship: Iraqi Refugees and the Welfare State* by Sally Wesley Bonet

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BOOK REVIEW

MEANINGLESS CITIZENSHIP: IRAQI REFUGEES AND THE WELFARE STATE

BY SALLY WESLEY BONET

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS, 2022. IV + 256 PAGES

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*America is not at all what I thought it would be.
Sometimes I wish I never came. (113)*

Meaningless Citizenship is a powerful scholarly work that unveils the grim realities of American exceptionalism by delving into the lives of four Iraqi refugee families displaced by imperialism, war, and occupation. Having sought refuge in America, these families were confronted by the hollowed-out remnants of a welfare state destroyed by neoliberalism. Filled with aspirations for a brighter future, these Iraqi refugees arrived in Philadelphia in search of a stable life for themselves and their children. Instead of a better life, they encountered exclusion and more suffering. *Meaningless Citizenship* exposes the stark contradictions and profound failures of refugee resettlement in America—the very nation that caused the displacement of these Iraqis and the destruction of their home country.

Drawing from a comprehensive four-year, multi-sited, and multilingual ethnographic study, Sally Wesley Bonet documents how refugees acquire an understanding of US citizenship through their encounters with state institutions, such as public schools, assistance programs, resettlement agencies, and welfare offices. Taking the family as her unit of analysis and moving beyond the narrow focus of schooling, Bonet shows the daily struggles faced by Iraqi refugee youth and their parents as they find themselves entangled in institutions that shape them into laboring subjects. Using the stories and lived experiences of these refugees and their families, Bonet questions and challenges Western notions of democratic citizenship, humanitarianism, multiculturalism, tolerance, and acceptance of the “other.” She then offers recommendations for how to rethink and improve the refugee resettlement program in America, based on the brutal realities faced by these Iraqi refugees.

In chapter 1, Bonet describes how the American refugee resettlement program serves the interests of capitalism by shaping refugees into laboring subjects through the principle of self-sufficiency, which is defined as finding immediate employment and avoiding reliance on public assistance. As she recounts the Iraqis’

pre-resettlement hardships of war, loss, and displacement, Bonet demonstrates how this principle affected these traumatized refugees, who were forced to take any job available in order to survive in America. Before the limited support they received disappeared and financial obligations accumulated, including refugee travel loans, they agreed to unfavorable terms and conditions of work. Lacking essential language skills, qualifications, and easily transferable work experience, they found themselves trapped in poverty and low-paying jobs, which put them in league with impoverished Americans.

Chapter 2 describes the paradox of America's welfare system using the rigid and punitive encounters the refugees had with the welfare office. Bonet documents how the welfare officers offered insufficient and diminishing support, accompanied by a punitive and controlling approach aimed at removing the refugees from public assistance as quickly as possible. One refugee in Bonet's study described her experience with welfare agents, who are supposed to provide support through various forms of public assistance: "The welfare agent is constantly monitoring you. They try to reduce your food stamps and penalize you for every small amount of money you receive. That's how it goes for us" (59). Bonet then describes the intense scrutiny and reduction of welfare benefits that subjected the refugees to tremendous stress and put them in a precarious situation. This system ultimately shattered their aspirations to achieve financial independence, due to their fear of losing welfare benefits—which is the inherent result of the design of the neoliberal welfare system. Bonet explains the refugees' frustration as the rights they envisioned and believed they were entitled to remained elusive. Tired of the restrictions of the refugee label, they questioned and rejected the empty promises of citizenship: the American refugee resettlement system failed to deliver on its obligations.

Embedded in these refugees' aspirations for the good life is their desire to access education. Education remained a top priority for the Iraqis in this study, as they saw it as a bridge to social mobility. In chapter 3, however, Bonet highlights how these aspirations were left unfulfilled. The young refugees in the study were enrolled in an underperforming and underfunded school in Philadelphia, a consequence of budget cuts resulting from neoliberal policies. The challenges they faced further complicated their efforts to realize full citizenship. The refugee students received schooling, but without the necessary supports needed to complete their education, all while grappling with the effects of trauma and interrupted schooling resulting from their experiences in Iraq. The school system failed to provide the essential supports for the refugee students as they transitioned within and beyond school, and at the same time it reinforced structural inequalities and deficit narratives.

Bonet also documents instances of discrimination, bullying, marginalization, and Islamophobic remarks by both teachers and students, which deeply affected the Muslim Iraqi refugee youth, in particular in the post-9/11 context. Over time, these refugee youth became aware of their status as outsiders, which ate away at their aspirations and hopes for integration into American society through education.

The pursuit of postsecondary education was another dream that proved unattainable for older refugee youth. Bonet explains in chapter 4 that refugees often did not have transcripts that documented their educational attainment, and they were placed in classes without any regard for their age, previous education, or premigratory conditions resulting from the war in Iraq. In certain cases, interruptions in their education meant that they could not complete their schooling, as they had reached the age limit for public education. These rigid education policies and neoliberal reforms pushed these young people into low-wage jobs. Bonet found that adult education programs also did not respond to the refugees' unique needs and caused them to lose their motivation to learn. Bonet illustrated that, as the refugees struggled to find time for studying while also having to work to sustain themselves, their attempts to access and continue secondary and postsecondary education caused them extreme stress and anxiety. This predicament also hindered their language learning and integration into American society, and impeded their sense of belonging to a nation-state. Bonet describes the repeated instances of exclusion the adult refugees experienced, which caused them to question America's exceptionalism and its liberal ideals.

In chapter 5, Bonet examines access to healthcare as another fundamental human right the refugees had hoped to have in America. Unfortunately, it was another right that remained elusive for them. Bonet asserts that many of the health issues experienced by refugees were either caused or worsened by the challenges they faced both before and after resettlement. She offers evidence that demonstrates how the bodies of Iraqi refugees were weakened by the impact of America's actions prior to and following their resettlement. During the war, Iraq's healthcare institutions were severely damaged, putting millions of Iraqis' lives at risk. Bonet explains that, in the United States, issues such as language barriers, a lack of transportation to healthcare centers or hospitals, and the time constraints imposed by health insurance providers prevented refugees from accessing the medical care they needed. This created additional stress and anxiety, which particularly affected women refugees. Participants in the study also revealed that their pain and ailments often were disregarded by physicians. Moreover, with their lack of knowledge and necessary skills, the refugees found it a significant challenge to

navigate the complex American healthcare system. Bonet's research highlights how the refugees' experiences before and after resettlement ultimately affected their health and wellbeing. As one refugee expressed, "Life here is like dying every day" (171), which emphasizes the ironic nature of their living in America. In the final section of the book, Bonet offers valuable recommendations for policy and practice in the hope of enhancing healthcare programs for refugees and having a positive impact on their lives.

Meaningless Citizenship is a valuable resource for both scholars and practitioners. It offers deep insights into the intersection of education in emergencies and citizenship. The author highlights the systemic barriers and shortcomings of the refugee resettlement program through the personal narratives and lived experiences of resettled Iraqi refugees, thereby challenging the idea of America as an ideal destination for refugees. The book makes a significant contribution to understanding the challenges and experiences faced by refugees in their encounters with state institutions. Sally Wesley Bonet's critical analysis of and theorizing about citizenship under neoliberalism and capitalism reveals a troubling dynamic, wherein the welfare state is progressively emptied and citizenship, narrowly defined, increasingly positions its citizens as laboring subjects.

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